

Author

Hiiro Shimotsuki

Illustrator

Takashi Iwasaki

vol. **5**

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purchase!

PEDDLER IN ANOTHER WORLD

**I CAN GO BACK TO MY WORLD
WHENEVER I WANT!**



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Summary of the Previous Volume

I was slowly getting used to the idea of grandma being back in my life, when one fateful evening, after coming home from visiting grandpa's grave, I discovered my twin sisters, Shiori and Saori, frozen in shock in front of the closet leading to Ruffaltio with the door wide open. They had discovered the portal. I instantly went into panic mode, while grandma just laughed heartily.

In the end, I found myself reluctantly having to babysit the twins as they wandered off into the forest. While making our way to Ninoritch, we stumbled across a mysterious giant egg that my sisters *insisted* we take back home with us. Despite my intentions to give it to someone who would actually know what to do with it, Saori demanded that we keep it. And wouldn't you just know it? It turned out to be a dragon egg. And not just from any dragon either, but from the Immortal Dragon, a creature that had supposedly been around since the dawn of time. Not only that, the hatchling—whom we ended up naming Suama—was able to use transformation magic and assumed the form of a little girl. And if *that* wasn't enough, it turned out a bunch of demons *really* coveted the dragon egg too.

Then all hell broke loose. The demons kidnapped Aina and informed us they would only let her go in exchange for the egg. Thankfully, we managed to save her before immediately heading off into the forest in search of Suama's mother. Unfortunately, the demons found us before we could reach our destination, and Raiya and the other adventurers risked their lives battling them while a select group made a break for the Immortal Dragon's lair. We somehow made it inside the lair, only to find that the dragon we sought was long dead and all that remained of her was a skeleton. Or so we thought. By following grandma's instructions, I successfully managed to resurrect the Immortal Dragon with just a few drops of my blood and reunited her with her daughter at last.

For a gangly young man who was born and bred in modern-day Japan, it had seriously been a hectic couple of weeks. And from the looks of it, the madness seemed to be far from over.

"I am the dragon you brought back to life in the forest, master."

Just when I thought that this particular chapter had ended, a drop-dead gorgeous woman strolled into my shop, claiming to be the very dragon I had resurrected.

Chapter One: The Dragon Mom

“If you don’t mind, could I ask you some questions to make sure you’re *actually* the Immortal Dragon?” I said to the white-haired beauty, looking her up and down.

Her hair was as white as freshly fallen snow, aside from the underside, which was a vibrant blue. Just like Suama, she had a blue gem known as a “dragon-core crystal” embedded in her forehead. Her dress was as white as her hair, and if she’d been wearing a veil, she could’ve easily passed for a bride on her wedding day. I looked down and noticed she wasn’t wearing any shoes, but her feet weren’t touching the ground, as she was hovering a little way above it. She basically looked human in every way, but there was an unmistakable hint of magic about her.

“Of course. What would you like to know, master?” the woman said.

“Are you *really* the Immortal Dragon?” I asked. “The one who let us ride on her back in the Gigheena Forest?”

“Yes, I am,” she replied simply. “I was brought back to life by your blood.”

I couldn’t help but whisper an impressed “Whoa” on hearing this, because it meant this bombshell in front of me really *was* the Immortal Dragon. It also meant she was Suama’s mother. *And* she was calling me “master,” and talking super politely to me!

“Master, if I may...” she said to grab my attention.

“Hm?”

The white-haired beauty’s gaze drifted a few centimeters sideways from my face and settled on the black-haired woman beside me.

“Would you like me to take care of the pesky little devil who is clinging to your side?” the Immortal Dragon asked, her voice ice-cold.

“Oh? That’s rather a bold statement for you to make, considering you don’t even know who I am,” the demon retorted.

“Oh, rest assured, I am *well* aware of who you are. Though it appears you have failed to recognize me,” the Immortal Dragon said. “No matter. But remember this: should you ever bring trouble to my master’s door, I shall not hesitate to end your life, demon.”

Sparks flew between the two women, though Aina and Suama were too busy celebrating their reunion to even notice. The white-haired woman—who was Suama’s mother—was clearly ready to fight

the other woman, perhaps out of loyalty to me or maybe as a way to thank me for resurrecting her. Either way, it wasn't looking good.

"End my life?" the black-haired woman chuckled. "What an amusing notion. I would advise you not to run your mouth in front of me."

This woman was none other than the devil known as Celesdia. The devils were one of sixteen "demon" tribes that populated an island to the north of the continent. Moments before Suama's mother had walked in, Celes had barged into my shop and claimed that she was now my slave, even though I hadn't agreed to anything of the sort. *Seriously, give me a break!*

"My, my. I thought you devils at least had the ability to discern someone's strength. How very disappointing."

"What did you just say?"

Celes was staring daggers at Suama's mother, but the serene smile on the Immortal Dragon's face was unwavering. On one side, you had one of the strongest demons in existence, who had very nearly wiped out an entire squad of adventurers by herself, while on the other stood a legendary-with-a-capital-L dragon. And the two of them were currently engaged in a standoff in the middle of my shop.

What did I do to deserve this?

The atmosphere between the two was incredibly tense, to the point that I feared even the slightest provocation might escalate this into a full-on fight.

Why, oh why is this happening to me? Somebody, please help me!

I looked around the room, hoping that someone would leap to my rescue.

"Little Su!" Aina cried again.

"Ain-ya!" Suama yipped happily.

My eyes landed on Aina and Suama, who were still celebrating being reunited as Patty excitedly buzzed around them. The twins had also emerged from their room and were running up to the little dragon girl, gleefully yelling her name. None of them seemed to have even noticed that a fight was brewing between Celes and Dragon Mom. Actually, let's call her Dramom for short from now on, shall we?

I let out a long sigh. "Guess I don't have much choice," I mumbled to myself.

I had to somehow find a way to prevent the two of them from coming to blows in my store. After all, Celes had *already* smashed up my shopfront once, and I'd only literally just gotten it fixed, for Pete's sake! Not to mention, I was renting this building from Karen, meaning it didn't even belong to me. How was I supposed to explain another wall getting obliterated to her? Though, thinking about it, I'd be very lucky if my store was the only thing that got destroyed in their

impending battle. I mean, this was a clash between a *demon* and a *dragon* we were talking about here! The whole town could be reduced to ashes in a matter of seconds if things really got out of control.

I had to do something. It was my duty as the owner of this store. After all, there was no reason that the lives of the residents of this town should be placed in jeopardy because of something that concerned just me. *You've got this, Shiro! This is your time to shine!* I told myself. The fate of my poor little shop... Scratch that: the fate of the entire town was resting on my shoulders. I gave myself a quick mental pep talk, clenched my teeth in preparation for what was about to happen, then resolutely took a step forward.

"Come on, you two. You—" I started, but I didn't make it to the end of my sentence.

"Maybe I should refresh your memory, *demon?*" Dramom scowled at Celes. I didn't really understand what was happening, but it felt as if some sort of aura had started emanating from her body. It was oppressive, and dare I say, a tad murderous too. I knew I wasn't the target of her displeasure, but the overwhelming pressure rooted me to the spot all the same.

"That mana..." Celes gasped. "D-Don't tell me..." A look of realization flashed across her face. "You're the Immortal Dragon?!"

"Took you long enough!" Dramom chuckled. Confident in her superior strength, she glared at the demon in contempt. But Celes wasn't the type to back down so easily.

"Who cares who you are?" Celes sneered between gritted teeth. "You clearly think you are much stronger than me, but I will have you know that I was holding back during our fight!"

Refusing to admit defeat, Celes proceeded to give off a similar aura to Dramom's, as if to challenge her. The fight she was referring to had taken place a little over a week before. Celes had been beaten to a pulp by grandma (who hadn't even used her full strength against the demon) and was already in a really bad state before Dramom had even arrived on the scene. And that's without mentioning the dozens of adventurers she'd had to battle in the run-up. So what Celes was basically saying was that, if she were to face off against Dramom again but in top shape this time, she felt she'd be able to hold her own against her. The overwhelming auras emanating from both of them seeped into every corner of the shop, leaving me feeling weak in the knees. But there was someone in the room who was even more affected by this than me.

"Wh-What? H-Hey, Shiro! Wh-Wh-What is *she* doing here?!" Patty cried out in a panic, pointing at Celes. The fairy was particularly sensitive to mana. "I thought she'd gone back to her tribe! Is she planning on causing us trouble again? And who's the white-haired

lady?! Her magic is *insane*!”

She perched herself on my shoulder as she fired off this barrage of questions, her eyes flitting between Celes and Dramom. It was clear she was no longer in the mood to celebrate Suama’s return. It must have been tough, having such a high sensitivity to mana. I felt bad that her reunion with Suama had been spoiled. Not that it was *my* fault, but still.

“I’m glad you’ve noticed the impending apocalypse that’s about to take place here, boss,” I told her.

“H-How could I *not* notice when they’re churning out such large quantities of mana? Now, are you gonna tell me what’s going on here, Shiro?”

“I genuinely have no idea. All I know is...” I started, then trailed off.

“All you know is?” Patty prompted, repeating my words back at me with some urgency before loudly swallowing her saliva.

“All I know is these two are probably going to start fighting in the next couple of minutes,” I sighed.

“*What?*!” Patty cried. “But that’d be disastrous!”

“Yup, won’t it just? We’re in a bit of a pickle here, aren’t we? What do you think we should do, boss?”

“W-We’ve gotta stop them! If they start fighting, your shop will be blown to bits in literally seconds!” Patty said.

“Yeah, we really don’t have any other choice, do we? Guess we’re gonna have to put our lives on the line.”

Celes and Dramom paid zero attention to us as they both assumed fighting stances.

“What a pitiful display of empty bravado, demon,” Dramom taunted Celes, her voice dripping with condescension.

“You wish to find out firsthand if my ‘bravado’—as you call it—truly is ‘empty?’” the demon retorted in a low, threatening tone. Her eyes had narrowed to slits and there was a murderous glint in them.

“Demons are an eyesore. I shall not tolerate your presence anywhere near my master. If you *insist* on staying here, then by all means, allow me the pleasure of obliterating you where you stand!” Dramom’s smile didn’t even flicker while saying this, but the sheer amount of venom dripping from her words would have been enough to kill someone stone dead on the spot.

“Sh-Shiro! You *have* to stop them!” Patty squealed in my ear. “Quick!”

“I know, I know. Lemme try something...”

Okay, Shiro, this is your moment to shine. They’ll listen to you for sure this time.

“Hey, you two! Calm down a—”

“Obliterate me?” Celes scoffed, paying no attention to me whatsoever. “I would like to see you try. It is a shame, though. Shiro only just brought you back to life, yet here I am, about to end it already.”

“Has no one ever taught you that you should refrain from making empty promises, demon?”

Yeah, my plan wasn’t working. The two were so engrossed in their bickering, my words weren’t even reaching their ears. I was starting to run out of ideas.

“Fine! If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get!” Celes declared. “I will feast upon your flesh and blood and take your powers for myself, dragon!”

“What a troublesome little devil you are,” Dramom retorted. “For the sake of my master, it seems I have no choice but to teach you a lesson.”

And so, the die was cast. Celes spread her arms wide and unleashed a devastating shock wave that surged toward Dramom.

“Look out, Shiro!” Patty warned before quickly casting a spell of her own. A barrier of light instantly appeared around the two of us, as well as Aina, the twins, and Suama, shielding us all from the attack. I’d been told that this was called “defensive magic.”

Celes’s attack barreled toward Dramom, but the dragon remained completely unfazed, and it was soon clear why. Just as the shock wave was about to zero in on its target, a magic barrier materialized in front of Dramom and deflected the attack. A smug smile spread across the dragon’s face as Celes clicked her tongue in annoyance.

The redirected shock wave found a new target, however—namely, my shelves that were laden with an assortment of my wares. A deafening boom echoed around the room as the force of the attack obliterated not only my shelves but part of the wall too. All those items I’d spent so much money on, and that Aina had so carefully arranged on the shelves... More importantly, the wall I’d just gotten fixed... In the blink of an eye, it had all crumbled to dust. The damage was even worse than last time.

For a split second, I saw red. Then, all of a sudden, I heard a little snapping sound inside my head.

“B-B-Bro! What the heck is going on?!” Saori asked me in a panic. Well, it seemed the others had *finally* noticed something was up.

“B-Bro?” Saori tried again when she didn’t get an answer the first time.

“Bro-bro?” Shiori asked.

“Mister Shiro?” Aina said.

“Pa-pa?” Suama squeaked.

All three of them were looking up at me in confusion, waiting for

some kind of explanation.

I ignored them, took a deep, deep breath, then yelled at the top of my lungs, "You two had better stop that right *now!*"



I crossed my arms and struck my approximation of an imperious pose in front of Celes and Dramom. Perched atop my head, Patty mirrored my stance, angrily snorting air out through her nose. I didn't even try to hide just how pissed I was. Celes and Dramom were both kowtowing on the floor in repentance. Or at least, Celes was. Dramom had assumed a similar pose but was, in fact, hovering a few centimeters off the ground still. Both wore expressions of guilt and their eyes were firmly fixed on the floor in shame.

"Celes," I called out to the demon woman, my voice a lot deeper and more authoritative-sounding than usual.

"Y-Yes?" she asked with a start.

"Let's leave aside all this slave business for the time being. You came to see me because you felt like you were indebted to me in some way, correct?" I said.

She nodded as beads of cold sweat formed on her forehead. "Y-Yes."

I turned my attention to Dramom. "And you, Dramom? What brings you here?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"D-Dramom?" she echoed, surprised by the nickname I had given her.

"Yeah, you're Dragon Mom, aka Dramom for short," I explained.

"I-I see. I understand. If that is what you wish to call me, then henceforth, my name shall be Dramom."

I frowned. "It's only a temporary nickname. Please don't take it too seriously. Anyway, you didn't answer my question. What brought you to my shop?"

There was a moment of complete silence, then she replied quietly, "My daughter refuses to eat." She went on to tell me why she had come back to Ninoritch. "We superior dragons have the capacity to sustain ourselves by absorbing ambient mana. However, our young do not possess this ability yet, and they must instead consume 'proper' food to get their nourishment."

"Now that you mention it, Suama is a big eater," I noted.

"That is because young dragons need to ingest large quantities of food in order to grow up healthy. But my daughter has categorically refused to eat any of the food that I have served her."

"Really?" I said. I was quite taken aback by this. With her appetite, it was hard to imagine Suama ever rejecting food.

"Naturally, I asked her why she refused to eat anything, and she

told me that the food she had consumed while staying with you was better.”

“Well, I’m not sure if it was *better* than what you tried giving her, but she ate the same stuff as the rest of us did, albeit in much larger quantities.”

“So she did eat with you, then. Whenever I have given her something, she just says that she would rather eat your food, or at least, something similar to what you used to give her, master. She refuses to even *try* the food I have been serving her!” Dramom lamented, her fists clenched in frustration.

She sounded like one of those moms who’s always venting to her mom friends about how much of a picky eater her child is. Though it was somewhat understandable, because Suama’s comments must have dealt a significant blow to her pride.

“I understand. It’s definitely concerning when a child is refusing to eat,” I sympathized. “If you don’t mind me asking, could you tell me what you’ve tried giving her?”

“Ogre meat,” Dramom answered immediately, a proud look on her face.

“Ogre meat, huh?” I mused. “And how did you prepare it?”

“Prepare?” she repeated, tilting her head to one side in confusion.

“Yeah. Like, what cooking method did you use?” I said in an attempt to clarify what I meant.

But Dramom simply tilted her head to the other side, a look of pure incomprehension scrunching up her face. “Cooking method?”

Huh. She really has no clue what I’m talking about.

“Please tell me you didn’t try feeding it to her raw...” I said as a sense of disbelief started creeping over me.

To my dismay, she nodded. “Well, yes, I did. What’s wrong with that?”

For the second time that day, I was rendered utterly speechless. The only sound that escaped my lips was a bewildered “Wow,” and out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the twins and Aina were every bit as dumbfounded by her reply as I was. By contrast, Dramom was staring at me wide-eyed, clearly puzzled by my reaction, though her attention was soon drawn to the muffled laughter that was coming from beside her. I glanced down at Celes, who seemingly couldn’t contain her amusement any longer.

“And what is so amusing, demon?” Dramom asked, frowning at Celes’s reaction.

“Are you seriously asking me that question? I can’t *believe* the mighty Immortal Dragon doesn’t even know what ‘cooking’ is!” Celes said, chuckling softly.

“Do you know what this thing called ‘cooking’ is, demon?”

Dramom asked after a slight pause.

“Of course I do. Listen well, Immortal Dragon. Only a foolish creature would eat meat raw. Meat is only worthy of being eaten once it has been roasted over a fire and seasoned with spices,” Celes explained, a smug expression plastered across her face.

According to Aina, up until a couple of weeks ago, Celes hadn’t had a clue what cooking was either, and most of her meals had consisted of raw meat. In fact, everything she had just told Dramom had been taught to her by Aina.

“There are many other ways you can prepare meat too,” Celes continued enthusiastically. “You can boil it, steam it...”

I heard Dramom loudly gulp down her saliva.

“You can even cook it with other ingredients to give it even more flavor!” Celes exclaimed, chuckling once more. “I can’t believe you would just eat meat *raw*. That’s hilarious! No wonder your little daughter insisted on coming back to Shiro.”

“Are you *mocking* me, demon?” Dramom seethed, each word dripping with bloodlust.

But before the situation could escalate further, Patty quickly intervened. “I-If you even think about fighting again, I’m gonna kick you out of Shiro’s shop!” she warned them.

I cleared my throat. “Okay, I think I’ve got a good handle on the situation now. Suama wouldn’t eat anything, so you brought her here. Is that right?”

Dramom nodded. “Yes. She keeps saying that she wants to eat with you.”

Just as the words left her mouth, I heard a cute little growling noise coming from behind me. Then, to my surprise, I heard almost exactly the same noise coming from both Celes and Dramom’s stomachs. It appeared that all this talk of food had made everyone a little hungry.

“I see how it is,” I said with a nod. “And I can also tell that we’re all kinda hungry.”

I told Celes and Dramom to stand up.

“How about we all go and have lunch together?” I suggested, then glanced at the gaping hole in the wall of my shop. “I mean, it’s not like I can let any customers in here at the moment anyway,” I sighed.

No one had any objections, so I hung a “Temporarily Closed” sign on the front door and ushered everyone out of the store.

Chapter Two: A Letter from Far Away

Our little group headed for the Fairy's Blessing drinking hall. Why, you may ask? Well, simply put, because the portions they served there were absolutely massive, as they were geared toward filling an adventurer's stomach. Even their smallest portion would have been considered extra-large anywhere else, and if you were willing to pay a little more, you could get the extra-extra-large size instead. They also had special menus that respected the dietary restrictions of other races. But the best part was the food tasted pretty good, even if that was largely due to all the seasonings and condiments I supplied them with. So there I was, sitting at a table in the dining hall, watching Celes and Dramom absolutely *destroy* their meals.

"This is black boar meat, you said? The taste and texture are so different from its raw form. And this horned rabbit casserole—is that the right word? It tastes absolutely incredible! And this fish! I am always saying that river fish taste bland and uninspiring, but this one smells *so* good, and..."—*munch munch*—"...it tastes delectable as well! And what did you say this dish was called? Murder grizzly hot pot? Is that right? Let me see..."—*munch munch*—"Oh my, it is simply delightful! The meat just melts in your mouth!" By the sounds of it, Dramom was clearly in culinary heaven.

Beside her, Celes stopped stuffing her face for two seconds so she could chuckle. "I see you have finally discovered the wonders of 'cooking.' Shiro!" she barked at me. "Go order some more food. I want six more plates of this stew and seven more of the herb-grilled fish!"

But I just sat there, totally awestruck at the speed with which their plates were being cleared of food.

"I have lived for so many years, yet I had no inkling of just how *delicious* the food consumed by you small people was! Master, please bring me eight more of this 'cooking,'" Dramom instructed me, pointing to the dish she was presently wolfing down. "And let me see..." She looked around the table. "Bring nine each of this one, this one, that one, and that one over there as well, please."

I almost wanted to ask them where the hell all of that food was actually going in their slender bodies, but I somehow managed to restrain myself. And here I'd thought the reason Suama ate a lot was because she was still growing, but it turned out her mom's appetite

was even larger! However, that wasn't the only surprise awaiting me.

"I am now your slave, therefore it is your responsibility to feed me," Celes informed me.

"And since you are my master, you have to provide me with sustenance," Dramom said with a smile.

*Excuse me?! Nobody mentioned that I'd be footing the bill for their meals, let alone for the ginormous number of dishes they were getting through! Even the underclassman in my university's professional wrestling research club who somehow always found a way of making me pay for his food hadn't been as shameless as *this*! I almost wanted to tell them both to scram back where they came from.*

"Hey, Shiro, are you listening to me? Go get us more food," Celes ordered me again.

"Master, is the food not ready yet?" Dramom asked.

I called over a waitress who took my order with a strained smile before scuttling back to the kitchen. Every single adventurer in the dining hall had been rendered speechless by the sheer number of empty plates stacked up on our table, and to be quite honest, the mere thought of how much this was going to cost me made me want to wail aloud in despair. Blissfully unaware of my inner turmoil, Aina, the twins, and Suama were happily eating their lunch at the table next to ours.

"Here, little Su, try some stew," Aina said, offering a spoonful of the stuff to the little dragon girl.

Suama cheerfully slurped it down. "Ai!"

Saori was the next to offer the little dragon girl some food.

"Suama, this meat dish is really good too. Here, have some."

"Ai!"

"Suama, you have to eat some of this fish too. It's good for you!" Shiori told her.

"Ai!"



Why were they sitting at another table, you might ask? Well, there was a simple answer to that: the sheer quantity of food Celes and Dramom had ordered had covered the whole table, so we'd been forced to ask for the girls to be seated at a second table so they'd have room to eat. I seriously felt like crying.

The extra food I'd ordered for Celes and Dramom was brought out and the two of them cleared these new plates at light speed as well. By this point, I was starting to wonder if the pair were competing to see which of them could gobble down their meals the fastest. After all, the food was disappearing from their plates so fast, I found myself questioning whether it had even been there in the first place.

I groaned and hung my head in despair. Patty—who was perched on my shoulder—gently slapped me on the cheek. “You okay, Shiro?”

She had decided to stay with me rather than joining Aina and Suama at their table, reasoning that—and I quote—“Who else will be able to spring to your rescue if these two suddenly decide to attack you? As your boss, it's my job to protect you!” What a reliable little boss she was.

“No, boss, I'm not okay. Well, more like, my wallet's not okay,” I groaned.

“These two sure do eat a lot, don't they?” the little fairy said with an understanding nod. “Even I don't eat that much!”

“They sure do,” I agreed morosely.

“W-Want me to tell them off? Like, shout at them and be super scary and whatever?” she offered.

I shook my head. “Thanks for offering, though, boss. I really do appreciate it. Seriously, it almost brought a tear to my eye. But this is a dragon and a demon we're talking about here, you know?”

Patty's smug expression wavered a bit. “B-But aren't they your underlings?”

“Well, one of them claims to be my slave, while the other says she's my servant, so I guess so?” I said.

“R-Right? So that makes them *my* underlings too!” Patty concluded.

Since Celes and Dramom had both decided that I was their “master,” and since Patty was my boss, I guess her logic made some sort of sense. After all, if this were a company and I were their superior, Patty would be something along the lines of an executive or a director.

“And because you're *my* boss, that means you're *their* big boss,” I summed up.

“Y-Yeah! I'm their ‘big boss’! I'm really amazing, aren't I?” she said, beaming with pride. I couldn't help noticing that she was

standing a little taller than usual, almost as if asserting her new position.

“You totally are. Seriously, wow, big boss. You’re so cool!” I exclaimed, laying it on thick.

“Hey, stop making fun of me!” the little fairy pouted, puffing her cheeks out indignantly.

I laughed. “Sorry, sorry. Anyway, thanks for the offer, but I promise you, I’ll be fine,” I assured her. “This is my problem, and I have to deal with it myself.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“Yup, I am.”

“Okay. But if you want me to tell them off, you just let me know, okay? I’m your boss, after all! I have to help you out when you’re in trouble!”

I nodded. Despite the tough front she put up, Patty was really quite caring. I found myself thinking that I should really try to learn from her.



Just as Dramom and Celes were finishing up the last morsels of their meal, I heard a familiar voice from behind me. I quickly identified it as belonging to Emille, the guild’s receptionist.

“Mister! Care to tell me what’s going on here?” she demanded.

I turned around to look at her. “What do you mean?”

Her eyes widened with anger as she pointed first at Celes, then at Dramom. “Who *are* these women?!” she shrieked.

The two women in question didn’t react to Emille prodding a finger toward them, as they had both slipped into food comas, pure bliss radiating from their faces. It looked like they had finally had their fill of guildhall food.

“Oh, you wanna know about Celes and Dramom, do you?”

“Of course I do! I can’t believe it, mister. You already have me, yet here you are, waiting hand and foot on these two stupidly busty women! You’re so cruel, mister, purposely flaunting them in front of me like this! It’s a huge slap in the face! The only way I can see myself forgiving you is if you profess your eternal love to me right this instant! And with a ring!”

“I wouldn’t say I’m waiting on them hand and foot,” I disputed.

But Emille was having none of it. “I don’t care about your excuses!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands over her ears and shaking her head left and right.

“Master, may I ask who this rabbitwoman is? Do you know her?” Dramom piped up. Emille’s little outburst must have pulled her back to reality.

“Shut up!” Emille snapped at her. “Don’t you dare talk to my mister! Who the hell even *are* you anyway?” she spat, her eyes bulging out of their sockets.

But in spite of Emille’s hostile attitude toward her, Dramom simply smiled and placed a hand on her chest as she introduced herself. “My name is Dramom.”

“Uh, no, it’s not,” I quickly interjected. “That’s just a temporary nickname.”

“I am master’s servant,” Dramom continued. “I have vowed to devote my life to him.”

“Wh-Who’s this ‘master’ you are talking about?” Emille asked.

“My master is right here.” She paused for a brief moment as she waved a hand toward me. “Shiro Amata.”

“*What?!*” Emille shrieked. “Mister! What the heck is going on here?! What’s this white-haired bimbo talking about? You’d better explain yourself right this instant!”

“What is it you do not understand?” Dramom interjected. “Mr. Shiro here is my master. I belong to him, mind, body, and soul, till death do us part. Might I inquire what business you have with him?”

“T-Till death do you part?!” Emille gasped as if she’d just been punched in the stomach, completely misunderstanding what these words represented. She clutched at her head and staggered back a few steps, before quickly recovering and getting in Dramom’s face. “You thieving little *bitch!*”

Dramom frowned. “Please refrain from calling me a dog. I am a dragon, and would like to be referred to as such.”

“A dragon? What in the world are you even talking about? Seriously, save the sleep-talking for when you’re off in dreamland, yeah?” Emille hissed, her eyes filled with fury. Her gaze then drifted across to Celes and a look of realization appeared on her face. “You know, now that I’m getting a good look at her, isn’t this woman that demon from—*mmph!*”

I tugged Emille by the arm and quickly slapped my hand over her mouth. “Shhhh! Don’t even think about finishing that sentence.”

Aside from the hand clamped over her mouth, it looked as if I’d brought her in for a hug, which was something I was *less* than thrilled about, but sometimes, ya gotta do what ya gotta do, and at this present moment in time, my main priority was to keep Celes’s identity a secret. While there was a trade agreement between Ninoritch and the devils in place now, only a handful of people knew that Celes was actually a demon. I was a little worried that learning there was a demon in their midst might spark panic among the townsfolk, or at the very least, invite some scornful comments from the adventurers. The only people who knew about Celes’s identity were Ney, a select

few high-ranked adventurers, and Karen.

I moved my lips closer to the bunny girl's ear. "Hey, Emille. Remember what we said before? We have to keep Celes's identity a secret for the time being, okay?" I whispered quietly so that no one else would hear us.

"A-Ah, m-mister..." she moaned. "M-Mister, my..." There was a sharp intake of breath. "Ah! My ears! They're *sensitive*!" Her face had gone as red as a tomato, and she had started gyrating her hips suggestively.

Horried, I immediately let go of her and put as much distance between the two of us as possible.

"I can't believe you just literally *pounced* on me in the middle of the day like that!" Emille cooed. "You're such a pervert, mister." Once again, I could almost hear the heart symbol punctuating her sentence.

Could someone please put me out of my misery?



"Anyway, aren't you supposed to be working?" I asked Emille.

"Oh, but I am! I'm working very hard right now! That's actually why I came over here," she said.

I gasped in an overexaggerated way. "Seriously? You're *actually* working for once?"

"Why do you sound so surprised?" she pouted. "I always take my work seriously! I mean, I don't wanna get yelled at by the guildmaster."

I didn't say anything. I simply stared at her with a mix of awe and shock.

"And what are you making that face for?" she sulked. "You know what? Forget it. I won't give you this letter after all," she announced with a shrug.

"Wait, what letter?" I asked, confused.

"The letter that came for you today," she explained. "And from the royal capital, no less!"

My jaw hit the floor. "From the *royal capital*? But I don't know anyone there. Hm, who would send me a letter?" I mused aloud. "Well, anyway, could you give it to me?"

Emille shook her head. "Nope. We have to go through all the formalities first," she said, pointing to the reception desk as if to tell me to follow her there.

"Okay." I turned to Celes and Dramom, who had been watching the whole exchange in silence. "Celes, Dramom, I'm going over there for a bit. Stay put, okay?"

Celes nodded curtly. "Understood."

"Yes, master," Dramom replied.

I turned to Patty next. “Boss, can you make sure they don’t get up to any mischief?”

“Sure thing! I *am* their big boss, after all,” the little fairy said, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

I ordered ten dessert plates in the hope that more food would keep Celes and Dramom occupied, then followed Emille to the reception desk, where I signed a form.

“Here you go, mister,” Emille said as she handed me the letter.

The envelope was adorned with illustrations of a popular Japanese mascot character, plus a different one drawn on the seal, and the words “To Shiro” were written across it. I didn’t even need to look at the sender information on the reverse to know who it was from, for there was only one person in this world I had given one of these letter sets to as a gift.

“A letter from Zidan?” I mused aloud.

That’s right. The person who had written to me was none other than Zidan, the guildmaster of the Eternal Promise merchant guild.

Chapter Three: The Secret Message

I opened the letter and started reading.

To my dear friend Shiro,

I bet my letter has taken you by surprise, hasn't it? You'll never guess where I am. Well, I'll tell you. The royal capital!

Zidan went on to describe every little detail of his trip to the capital, such as the must-visit sights, the kind of items that were being sold there, how he was thinking about opening up a branch of his guild there, and all that jazz. The letter ended with the words: *It'd be great if you could come to the royal capital too!*

"Hm, this letter..." I mumbled to myself, bringing a hand up to my chin.

Something was very wrong here. You see, when I'd given Zidan this letter set as a gift, I'd made it crystal clear to him that it should only be used for emergencies or when he had some ultra-important news to convey, so I could be sure that it was actually from him. So why would he be using one of these letters to tell me about his sightseeing trip to the capital?

I hummed and read the letter through a second time. Zidan and I regularly corresponded by letter, but they were always business-related, so it was completely out of character for him to send one just to update me on his personal life. Besides, unlike in Japan with its super-efficient postal service, sending a letter in Ruffaltio was pretty expensive. I couldn't fathom why Zidan would spend such a large sum of money just to tell me about the best places to go in the capital.

"Emille," I called out to the receptionist.

"Yes, mister? Oh! Are you going to propose to me now? Is that it?"

"Nope," I said quickly. "I am definitely *not* going to propose to you. Not now, not ever."

She pouted. "Aw, c'mon, mister. There's no need to reject me *that* strongly," she said. "Anyway, what do you want?"

"Can you tell me how this letter was delivered to the guild?"

"Sure. Those guys brought it in," she said, turning her head and gesturing toward a group of about five or six burly men quaffing away in the drinking hall. "They're a party from the main branch of the Fairy's Blessing," she explained.

"Seriously? Those guys came all the way from the capital just to

deliver a *letter*?" I said in disbelief.

She shrugged. "It's not all that surprising. Lots of low-ranked adventurers do deliveries of this kind. Though, now that you mention it, those guys *are* silver-ranked. Hard to believe, huh? They're just so *ugly*."

"What have their looks got to do with their adventuring rank?" I asked, somewhat exasperated. "Hold on a minute. Zidan hired a silver-ranked adventuring party to come all the way out here to deliver this letter?"

"Yup. Pretty overkill, if you ask me. At first, I thought they'd been transferred here to help explore the ruins and taken the job because they were coming out this way anyway, but nope. They're heading back tomorrow."

"So they *literally* came all the way out here just to deliver this letter to me?"

Emille nodded. "And not only that, the sender specifically requested a high-ranked party to bring it here."

"Doesn't that mean the sender would've paid even more? If I remember correctly, the guild charges extra for special requests like that, right?"

"Well, that depends, but it's usually the case, yeah," she confirmed. "If the client basically says they don't want anyone but *these* people doing the job, we tend to charge extra for that, since it means those adventurers won't be able to take on any higher-paying requests. But at least the client gets peace of mind knowing that the job is being done by competent adventurers." She paused and turned to look at me again. "The guild apparently recommended that party. Still, hiring a silver-ranked party just to deliver a letter? The client must be loaded."

In short, here is what must have happened: Zidan went into the main branch of the Fairy's Blessing and said he had a job for them, but that he would only hire an adventuring party he could "trust." The guild recommended the silver-ranked "Ugly Guys" (as Emille called them) adventuring party, which would have cost Zidan a hefty sum, but at least he knew the letter would arrive here safely.

"So basically, Zidan considered this letter to be *incredibly* important and wanted to make sure it reached me at all costs," I concluded.

The content of the letter had seemed pretty unimportant and kind of frivolous, but Zidan had paid an astronomical sum to have it delivered to me, and by a silver-ranked party, no less. He had gone to all of these extremes just for one single letter, and it was clear to me that Zidan didn't just *want* it delivered to me; it *had* to reach me, no matter what. I recalled the last line of the letter: *It'd be great if you*

could come to the royal capital too!

“Zidan’s asking for my help,” I muttered to myself.

I was positive that Zidan was asking me to come to the capital. I skimmed the letter again and noticed he’d managed to sneak in the name of the inn he was staying at, as if to tell me that was where I needed to go. In light of this, there was only one thing I could do.

“I need to go to the capital,” I muttered to myself, but it quickly became apparent that I hadn’t said it quietly enough.

“M-Mister?” Emille exclaimed. “What do you mean you need to go to the royal capital?!” Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” I lied. “My friend just needs my help over there, it seems.”

“No big deal?! This is the *royal capital* we’re talking about! Do you have any idea how far it is from here?!”

“Uh...” I hesitated. “Yeah, about that. I have a question for you.”

“What is it, mister? Oh! Are you going to propose to me now? Is that it?” she asked, repeating what she’d said earlier, word for word.

“I already said no to that,” I reminded her. “Can you tell me how long it’d take me to get to the royal capital?”

Emille clicked her tongue, seemingly displeased that I wasn’t minded to pop her the question, then frowned and let out a long “Hmmm.” I figured she was probably trying to calculate how many days it’d take me to reach the royal capital from here. After spending a few more seconds thinking about it, she finally came out with her estimate.

“Probably around ten days by coach.”

“Ten days, huh?”

“Yup. Well, if you’re lucky, that is. Depends a lot on the weather. It might take you as long as two weeks to get there if it’s bad.”

Ten days at best, two weeks at worst. While I could always go back to grandma’s house if anything were to happen while out on the road, I felt a little hesitant about leaving my shop for so long. I was absolutely positive Aina would be able to manage just fine on her own, and while they were only available on the weekends, the twins could probably take care of stock replenishment for me. But even so, an entire month...

“Tsk. What am I thinking?” I chastised myself, shaking my head from side to side. My friend was in need. My store definitely *wasn’t* the priority here.

“Well, guess I’m going to the capital.”



“But how do I get there?” I mused aloud. “Walking’s obviously not an option. Maybe I should hire a horse? On second thought, I don’t

know how to ride one. Guess I'll need a carriage, then. But should I rent one or just straight-up buy one? Hm..."

"You seem pretty troubled by this whole situation," said Emille, who'd overheard me mumbling to myself.

"Well, I'd like to find the most efficient way of getting to the capital that'll take me the least amount of time possible."

She hummed. "Well, if you *really* wanna go, I won't stop you. But if you ask me, you should consider hiring an escort of some kind too. After all, you're rich, which means bandits might target you." She paused and her gaze shifted to the "Ugly Guys" (Emille's words) adventuring party. "How about asking the adventurers who delivered the letter? They're heading back to the royal capital anyway, so they'd probably say yes."

"Those guys, huh?"

I studied them for a few seconds. From left to right, you had a brawny dude, a brawny dude, another brawny dude, an even brawnier dude, I'll skip over the fifth one, and lastly, an absolute gorilla of a man. Their party seemed to be composed almost exclusively of middle-aged men with rippling muscles. I really couldn't see myself traveling with them for ten whole days.

"I'll think about it," I said to Emille after a pause. "I'd like to ask some people I'm more *familiar* with first."

"I figured you might say that. Well, if you want those guys to accompany you to the capital, you're gonna have to give me your final answer sometime today, so I can go ask them for you." She paused and looked at me from under fluttering eyelashes. "By the way, what kind of person is this friend of yours?" she asked coyly.

"Zidan? Oh, he's the guildmaster of the merchant guild I belong to," I told her.

"The *guildmaster* of a merchant guild?! He must be loaded!" she exclaimed, and I could practically see the gold coins in her eyes. "Mister! Could you introduce us? Like, right *now*! Take me to the capital with you!"

I shrugged. "I mean, I don't mind introducing you to him, but he's a birdman."

There was a pause, then Emille said, "A birdman?"

"Yes, a birdman."

She hummed. "How birdlike are we talking here?" she asked.

"Pretty birdlike, I'd say. Hold on. I have a picture somewhere." I took out my cell phone and showed her the photo I had of Zidan in all of his birdlike glory with his feathered arm slung around my shoulders. "That's him there."

Emille's reaction was instant. "Don't worry, mister. My heart solely belongs to you!" she assured me as she leaped over the counter

and wrapped her arms around me. “After all, I can’t lay eggs! So you’re still my number one, mister.”

It took me a good while to break free of the greedy bunny’s clutches.



“Sorry, man, we’d love to help out, but we really can’t go to the royal capital,” said Raiya, the leader of the Blue Flash crew.

His party had entered the guild at the exact moment I’d managed to free myself from Emille’s grasp. I’d told them all about my current predicament and asked if they might be able to escort me to the capital, and well, you saw the response.

“Yeah, I guessed you might say that. After all, the royal capital’s pretty far away, isn’t it? You probably can’t just go dropping all your other duties for a whole month,” I said.

“That’s not the problem, Shiro,” interjected Nesca, the taciturn mage who also happened to be Patty’s magic teacher. “The destination is.”

“What, the royal capital?” I asked, confused by this.

Nesca nodded but didn’t elaborate any further, meaning it fell to Rolf the battle priest to offer an explanation. “You see, prejudice toward beastfolk is still very prevalent in the royal capital, Mr. Shiro, sir,” he sighed.

“We can’t go there because of me, meow,” Kilpha the cat-sith ranger said with a pout.

Now that I thought about it, the Blue Flash crew had mentioned something about that when we’d first met. They’d apparently gotten sick and tired of how nasty people in the royal capital were toward beastfolk and had decided to relocate to the much smaller town of Ninoritch in the hope of facing less discrimination.

“Yep, that’s the reason. We’re really sorry, man, but we unfortunately can’t help you this time,” Raiya said sheepishly.

I shook my head. “Oh, no, please don’t be sorry. If anything, I should be the one apologizing. It was pretty inconsiderate of me to make the request. Don’t worry. I’ll try my luck elsewhere.”

“For your protection, I would suggest traveling with a party ranked crystal or higher, Mr. Shiro, sir,” Rolf said to me. “However, I am afraid that finding a party of that caliber willing to make such a long journey might prove difficult at the present time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We don’t have enough people at the moment,” Nesca explained.

Ever since a bunch of ruins dating back to the Ancient Magic Civilization Era had been discovered in the Gigheena Forest right next to Ninoritch, the Fairy’s Blessing guild had made it their mission to

explore every single one they could find. As such, any adventurer ranked crystal or above spent most of their time in said ruins, clearing out the dungeons inside. Plus, not only had the guild requested they do this, the adventurers were also allowed to keep any treasure they found, and from what I'd been told, some of the stuff down there was so insanely valuable, you could sell one and spend the rest of your life splashing money around to your heart's content, and you'd still have some of it left over when you died. Of course, if any adventurer were willing to take on my request, I would make sure they were properly compensated for the task, but spending a whole month on the road would drastically reduce their chances of finding something valuable in the ruins, and let's put it this way: if I were in their shoes, I wouldn't even contemplate wasting my time with an escort mission. Not for a single second. It just wasn't worth it. Nope, at this present moment in time, there probably wasn't a single adventurer in the whole of the guild who'd be willing to take on my request.

"We're really, really sorry, man," Raiya repeated.

"I already told you, there's no need to be sorry," I reassured him. "I made an inconsiderate request. That's totally on me."

Well, my first (and only) choice of escort to take me to the royal capital had refused my request. *Guess I'm all out of options. I'm gonna have to go ask those gorillas to accompany me there*, I thought resignedly.

But just as I was about to go over to them, Raiya spoke up again. "Hey, man, I actually have an idea who you might be able to ask to escort you to the capital. They're pretty damn strong and it looks like they have a lot of spare time on their hands."

"Really? Who? Ohhh!" Realization suddenly dawned on me. "You mean Eldos?"

"Nah. Sure, he's got the muscles for the task, but he's not the type to take on escort missions. He's more suited to beating up monsters in the forest."

"Or single-handedly depleting the guild's entire stock of alcohol," I joked.

"Exactly," Raiya said, chuckling at my comment. "Anyway, I was thinking maybe you could ask *her*."

He jabbed his chin in the direction of a table in the far corner of the drinking hall. I followed his gaze and my eyes landed on...

"Hey! That is *my* dessert!"

"Well, it is hardly my fault if you insist on eating so slowly, demon."

"Give it back! I will kill you, dragon!"

Yup, my eyes landed on Celes and Dramom fighting over a dessert.

“How about asking that demon to be your bodyguard for your journey to the royal capital?” Raiya suggested.

Chapter Four: An Escort and a Means of Transportation

I bid goodbye to Raiya and the gang and headed back to my table in the drinking hall, where I outlined the situation to Celes.

“So if it’s at all possible, I’d like to ask you to act as my protection and accompany me to the royal capital.”

“Hm, so you wish for me to escort you there?” Celes asked contemplatively.

“Yeah. Would that be possible?”

“As I have already said to you, I am your slave. If you order me to protect you, then I shall do so, even if it costs me my life,” she declared.

“I’m not *ordering* you to do anything. I’m *asking* for your help,” I clarified.

“I do not see the difference,” she said, looking slightly confused.

“Master, you should not trust a demon to keep you safe,” Dramom interjected, throwing a dirty look in Celes’s direction.

“Well, I need *someone* to go with me to the capital as my protection. It’s pretty dangerous out there, you know. I’ve been told that there have been tons of bandit and brigand attacks on the highway lately,” I said.

“Master, might I inquire as to what exactly these ‘bandits’ and ‘brigands’ are?” Dramom asked, her head tilted to one side in confusion.

“I would also like to know,” Celes interjected. “Are they monsters exclusive to the hume realms?”

“No, they’re not monsters. They’re humes who refuse to respect the rules of society and attack people to steal their valuables,” I explained.

“You mean they attack their own tribesmen?” Celes said, blinking with surprise. “Now that I think about it, I believe my grandmother once told me it was common for humes to fight and kill each other. I never imagined it might be true, though.”

“I see the humes have not changed their ways. Even now, they still fight each other. Truly a pity,” Dramom sighed, shaking her head.

Well, it seemed neither demons nor dragons approved of intraspecies fighting. *Get your act together, humes. And the same goes for you, people of Earth.*

“But I think I understand now,” Dramom said. “Many dangers await you on your travels, master. And so...” She paused and brought a hand up to her chest before softly but resolutely declaring, “I shall accompany you and be your protection.”

“I appreciate the offer, but you have Suama to look after. I can’t ask a mom with a young child to just leave her with someone and come with me on such a long trip,” I said.

“Then we can bring my daughter along,” she suggested.

I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. “What?”

“Yes! That would solve the problem, would it not?” She clapped her hands together and beamed at me, clearly very proud of herself for coming up with what she deemed to be a workable solution.

“Uh, well, that’s a little...” I trailed off, unsure what to say to this idea.

Suama may have had the ability to shape-shift into a human, but she was still a dragon, and while I was sure Dramom would more or less know how to behave around humes due to how long she’d been alive, Suama was still a child, and I would no doubt have to keep an eye on her the whole time to make sure she didn’t go wandering off somewhere.

“Hm. I’m not sure that’s such a great idea,” I said.

“My daughter sees you as her father, though, master. Do you really plan to go on such a long journey without her?”

“Touché,” I sighed. I felt a sharp pang of guilt at her words, because she was of course right. Suama would be terribly sad if she couldn’t see me for the entire month. But taking her along meant babysitting her the whole time. I was racking my brain to try to come up with some kind of solution to this conundrum when I suddenly remembered something.

“Hey, Dramom.”

“What is it, master?”

“Could I maybe ride on your back like I did last time?” I asked.

When Suama was abducted by the demons, Dramom had allowed us to climb up onto her back so that we could catch up to them faster. The speed at which she’d flown had been incredibly fast, and I figured if we flew all the way to the capital at that rate of knots, we’d get there in no time. I decided it wouldn’t hurt to try it.

Dramom nodded enthusiastically. “Of course, master! You can ride on my back any time you like.” She seemed really happy at the idea. “However...” She trailed off and threw a death glare at Celes. “Even if you request it, I shall never let that demon on my back, master.”

Celes clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Shiro, you do not need to bother with this idiotic dragon. I will carry you.” Yet again, she was

quite clearly trying to turn this into a competition with Dramom.

“Uh, can I ask what you mean by ‘carry me,’ exactly?” I said.

“Of course.” She chuckled softly as she got up from her seat, then she walked over to me and wrapped her arms around my torso from behind. “Like this,” she said, lifting me out of my chair.

I was so taken aback, I didn’t have a clue what to say.

“What do you think? Now all I have to do is spread my wings and I can take you wherever you want to go,” she said, still clutching me. In fact, she was holding me so close to her, I was starting to sweat a little.

“Um...” I hesitated. “And you would be carrying me like this the entire time?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t you carry me on your back or something instead?” I suggested.

But she just shook her head. “If you were on my back, I would not be able to use my wings. It has to be like this.”

“Good point. All right. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll get Dramom to take me to the capital,” I announced.

“What?!” Celes exclaimed in disbelief.

Dramom, on the other hand, was positively gloating. “Your wish is my command, master.”

“Why did you choose her, Shiro? I can carry you just fine!” Celes protested. “Hey, are you listening to me? Look how easily I can carry you! Stop ignoring me!”

A long sigh escaped Celes’s lips at my complete lack of response.

“Fine,” she pouted. “But I am still coming along too!”

And just like that, I’d managed to secure myself not only an incredibly useful means of transportation but also a very powerful escort.



Now that I’d figured out how I was actually going to get to the capital, it was time to go tell my friends about my upcoming trip. My first port of call was the town hall where, after I’d apologized to Karen that her old house had gotten blown up yet again, I informed her I’d be out of town for a while.

“You’re going to the *royal capital*?” she repeated, her jaw on the floor.

That news in itself was clearly shocking enough, but when I added that I was planning to get there by riding a dragon, I was worried I might have to go fetch the town’s doctor. You see, while Karen knew Suama was a dragon, I hadn’t had the chance to tell her that Dramom had come to town, so when she learned the Immortal Dragon was in

Ninoritch, her body instantly stiffened and she looked on the verge of passing out. Well, I could hardly blame her for that. After all, Dramom could literally wipe her town off the map just by breathing out, so it was only natural that her reaction to this news would be so extreme.

“There’s...” She hesitated. “There’s a dragon here? In Ninoritch?” she whispered.

I noticed her legs were about to give out, so I hurried over to her side to support her. In an attempt to reassure her, I told her that Dramom had taken hume form and wasn’t just plodding around town as a dragon. I also added that she had taken to calling me her “master,” and for the most part, seemed to listen to my orders. This information appeared to help her to regain at least some of her composure.

“Shiro...” she started. “I’m leaving this whole dragon thing to you, all right? Just...” She paused slightly. “Take care of it.”

She didn’t walk me to the door when I left, but I didn’t hold that against her. After all, she was probably still too shocked to move.

Next on the list of people to tell were my little sisters. After leaving the town hall, I swung by their shop, Beauty Amata, and waited for them to have some downtime so I could break the news to them. They didn’t seem so concerned about it, though, since they could always go to grandma’s house and see me there.

“The royal capital, huh? I’d love to go there one day,” Shiori said.

“Hey, bro, come get us when you’re there! We wanna do some sightseeing!” Saori told me.

Shiori nodded excitedly at this. “That’s a great idea, Saorin!”

“I know, right?” my other sister boasted, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Oh, and don’t forget to bring me back a souvenir, bro-bro.”

“Oh, yeah! I want one too!”

They’d had the same reaction as if I’d said I was going away on an overnight trip. Not that I was about to start complaining about that. But unfortunately, it was now time for the hardest part of all: telling Aina and Patty I was leaving for a while. I told them to meet me in the town square and got Aina to sit down beside me on a bench before breaking the news.

“You’re going to the royal capital, Mister Shiro?” Aina asked.

“Yup. Zidan has asked me to join him there.”

“I see,” the little girl said, her shoulders slumping slightly.

“Hey, Shiro, what’s a ‘royal capital?’” Patty piped up.

“It’s the most prosperous city in the kingdom,” I explained to her. “And it’s where the king lives.”

“The ‘king?’” the little fairy repeated, the term clearly alien to her.

Aina was the one who answered her question. “The king is a

super-duper important person!”

Patty hummed. “*How* important?”

“Um...” The little girl didn’t know how to answer that one.

I gently placed my hand on her head and took over. “Put simply, he’s the man who oversees all the hume clan leaders.”

“Wait, so he’s more important than your clan leaders?”

“Yup. He’s, like, the leader of the clan leaders, if that makes sense.”

“So he’s basically the big leader?” she summarized.

“Exactly.”

The little fairy nodded her understanding before glancing at Aina. “So why does Aina look like she’s about to cry?” she asked me.

I scratched my head, a wistful smile on my face. “It’s because the royal capital is quite a long way from here.” This information made Patty hum thoughtfully again.

The majority of people in Ruffaltio spent their entire lives in the town they were born in without traveling around much, because frequent monster and bandit attacks meant that every time anyone set foot outside of the safety of the town, they risked being injured—or worse, killed. Because of this, most people deemed it safer to just never leave town at all. Now that I thought about it, it was actually pretty impressive that Stella had managed to travel all the way to Ninoritch from her old hometown when Aina was small. Mothers really were willing to go through a hell of a lot for their children, huh? I found myself respecting her even more than I already had.

“The royal capital is really far away, so it means we won’t get to see Mister Shiro for a while,” the little girl said dejectedly.

I had an idea. “Hey, Aina?”

“Hm?”

“If your mom’s okay with it...” I started.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to come with me?”

“What?” she exclaimed.

Yup, I’d decided to invite her along too.

Her answer was immediate. “Yes! I wanna go!” Aina said, her hands clenched into fists and her cheeks red with excitement.

“And I’m sure mama will say yes if I tell her I’m going with you!”

“Is that so? Well then. Once you’ve got her permission, we can go.”

“Okay, I’ll go ask mama now!” the little girl said excitedly.

“Wait, *now*?” I hadn’t expected her to run and ask her mother straightaway.

“Yeah! I’ll be right back!”

And with that, she sprinted off in the direction of her house. *I just*

got *déjà vu* all of a sudden, I thought. I was once again reminded what an extremely decisive little girl Aina was.

“Hey, Shiro?” Patty said, slapping me on the cheek with her tiny hands to bring me back to reality.

“What is it, boss?” I asked.

“I’m coming with you too,” she declared.

“Sorry, what?”

“Wh-What’s with that reaction? Last time, you promised me you’d take me with you the next time you went somewhere!”

When Karen, Aina, and I headed off to the feudal capital, Mazela, Patty had been desperate to come along, but I’d said no to her, and it wasn’t just because she was a fairy, an incredibly rare creature that would turn a lot of heads. She’d also been really bad at controlling her magic at the time, so I’d thought her coming with us wasn’t such a great idea.

“Hey, watch this!” the little fairy urged as she raised her hand and extended it toward the middle of the town square. She let out a little grunt and a tiny fireball the size of a tennis ball sprung from her hand, then burst with a small pop on reaching its destination. It was so weak that even I as a non-magic user could tell it would barely do any damage. It *might* be enough to wound a jackalope, though even that wasn’t a given. That just went to show how frankly underwhelming it was.

“Wow. That was so *weak*!” I said, marveling at its lack of intensity.

“Wasn’t it just?” Patty said, beaming. “A-Are you surprised?”

“I am!” I admitted. “Astonished, even!”

I’d seen Patty practicing her magic with Nesca once before, and at that time, no matter how hard she tried to keep her magic under control, the little fairy could only unleash incredibly powerful pillars of fire. After witnessing her total lack of control over her own magic firsthand, I couldn’t talk myself into taking her with us to Mazela. However, the tiny fireball she’d just fired off looked more like the kind of spell a beginner mage might use. It might have seemed like nothing to the casual observer, but this was in fact huge news, because it showed that she had gotten much, *much* better at controlling her magic.

“I trained lots and lots to be able to do that!” she said proudly.

“Yeah?”

“And Nesca praised me too!”

“Yeah?”

“As you can see, I’m a lot better at controlling my magic now! So, um...”

She was having a bit of difficulty trying to communicate exactly

what she wanted to say, and she ended up resorting to simply looking up at me with puppy-dog eyes. I nodded and gestured for her to come and stand on my palm.

“You can come with us, boss,” I told her.

A huge grin spread across her face. “You mean it? Can I really come?”

“Well, I *did* promise I’d take you with us when we went off traveling again. But you’ll have to stay hidden, okay?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s fine. I’m a lot better at hiding now too! I can dive straight into Aina’s backpack, like *whoosh!* And also...”

With her eyes sparkling with excitement and her cheeks rosy-red, the little fairy reeled off a detailed list of all the areas where she’d improved. She was positively glowing as she spoke, and her smile was as bright as the sun.

A few minutes later, Aina was back again, having gotten her mother’s permission to join us on our excursion. It seemed this trip was going to be a lot livelier than I’d initially anticipated.



And just like that, it was the next morning, and we were getting ready to depart. All of our friends and relatives had come out to see us off.

“Aina, don’t cause any trouble for Mr. Shiro, okay?” Stella said to her daughter, crouching down in front of the little girl so she was at her eye level. “And remember, you’re Suama’s big sister, so you have to protect her out there.”

“Right! I’ll make sure to hold her hand the whole time, because if I do that, she can’t get lost, right?” the little girl said.

“Yep, that’s right. You’re ever so smart and responsible, Aina,” her mother praised before wrapping her arms around the little girl and hugging her for a long time, seeming very reluctant to let her go. Though that wasn’t all that surprising, because the royal capital was pretty far away, which meant she wouldn’t get to see her daughter again for quite a while.

Next to say goodbye to us was Karen. “Shiro, my parents live in the royal capital,” she told me. “If you find yourself in need at all, go ask them for help. I’ve also prepared a document to confirm your identity.”

She handed me a letter that I could give to her parents if I needed their help at any point while I was there, as well as a hand-drawn map of the city and another document.

“I wrote this letter to tell my parents who you are and to help you if you’re in trouble,” she explained. “Call it a safety measure, if you will. You must be familiar with the concept, being a merchant,” she

said with a wink.

It always made me happy to see her acting so comfortable around me. “Thank you, Karen.”

The Blue Flash crew had also come to see us off.

“You should look into opening a branch of your store in the royal capital, man. You’d make a crapload of money over there,” Raiya told me.

“No, that’s a bad idea, Raiya,” Nesca said.

“Huh? Why?” he asked her, confused.

“Because it’d mean him having to spend even *more* time over there before coming back here,” the mage explained.

“O-Oh, yeah, you’re right,” Raiya said, then he turned to me again. “Hey, man, forget what I just said, yeah? Get whatever business you have in the capital done and come straight back, you hear?”

Kilpha puffed her cheeks out angrily. “You always say stuff without thinking, Raiya!”

“Ah, but Miss Kilpha, ma’am, if Mr. Raiya put thought into his words, he would not be the Mr. Raiya we know and love, would he? I for one would be a little sad about that,” Rolf said.

“Huh. You’re right, Rolf,” Kilpha admitted. “Never mind, Raiya! You don’t have to change a thing, meow!”

We all laughed heartily at this. It was clearly a bit of an inside joke among the Blue Flash crew, but we all still found it funny.

“All righty, everyone, we’re—”

I was in the middle of saying “We’re off!” when all of a sudden, *she* appeared.

“Hey, miiisteer! Pleaaase wait for meeee!”

Yup, you guessed it. It was Emille, who was presently sprinting toward us from the other side of town. She was carrying a thick wad of papers, which I instantly knew was a list of things she wanted me to buy for her, just like what she’d given me before I headed off to Mazela.

“Emi’s coming, meow! Quick, Shiro! Go, meow!” Kilpha urged me.

“We’ll deal with her,” Nesca assured me.

Rolf nodded. “We shall not let her anywhere near you, Mr. Shiro, sir.”

They were literally talking about her like she was some kind of monster charging toward us, though I knew they were just joking around.

“C’mon, man! Off you go!” Raiya said, slapping me on the back, before turning to the little fairy on my shoulder. “Take care of him for us, Patty, you hear?”

“O-Of course I will! I’m Shiro’s boss, after all,” she said with a self-important look on her face.

“Make sure to keep your magic under control at all times,” Nesca instructed her, treating her to a stern look.

Patty’s smug expression quickly faded, and her face went completely red. “I-I *know*!” she squealed irritably.

I smiled at the exchange but then remembered we had to get going before Emille reached us. “All right, everyone. We’re off for real now!”

We departed from the town on foot and walked a little way until we were sure we were out of sight of the townsfolk. Then, Dramom changed into her dragon form, and Aina and I climbed up onto her back.

“Here, little Su, take my hand!” Aina said, holding out her hand to help the little dragon girl up.

“Ai!” Suama chirped, beaming.

And just like that, we were off.

“Hey, w-wait, Immortal Dragon!” Celes yelled up at us from the ground.

True to her word, Dramom hadn’t let her on her back.

Chapter Five: Ramsdel, The Royal Capital

I'd been told it'd take us roughly ten days to get to the royal capital by carriage. Guess how long it took us to get there riding on Dramom's back? Three hours.

"Mister Shiro! Look! Look!" Aina said excitedly as she pointed at the city in the distance.

It wasn't even noon yet, but we were already almost there. I had to admit, Dramom sure was amazing. She'd even put up a barrier around us to protect us from the buffeting wind. I was really grateful for that, because I seriously had no idea how we would've managed to stay on her back for so long without it.

"Wow. So that's the royal capital, huh?" I marveled.

"We can even see the castle from here, Mister Shiro!"

"Oh, hey, you're right!"

"I wanna see what it's like inside!" she said.

I couldn't help chuckling at her innocence. "Sadly, I don't think that'll be possible. I know what you mean, though. I'd love to visit a castle at least once in my life."

"Me too!"

The capital was way bigger than I'd expected, and it had a large white castle—the royal palace—standing proudly in the middle of it. I felt like I was in a fantasy movie and could hardly contain my excitement as I looked down at the castle that was surrounded by walls, with a row of fancy-looking mansions on the other side, which I assumed must have been where the nobles and richest merchants lived. Beyond that, there were a bunch of regular houses that sprawled outward from these mansions, giving me the impression that the wealthiest and most affluent lived nearer the palace, while the regular citizens resided closer to the outskirts of the city. Must have been nice to be born into a rich family, huh?

"Um, Mister Shiro..." Aina piped up.

"Hm?"

"Um, are you sure we should still be on little Su's mama's back?" There was a hint of concern in Aina's voice as Dramom continued to fly toward the capital at breakneck speed. We were mere moments from being spotted, which would undoubtedly cause a panic among the cityfolk. They might even assume we'd come to lay siege to the

city.

"You're right, Aina. If we zoom in like this, the people of the capital will see us and get a big fright, won't they?" I said. "We should land somewhere secluded and go the rest of the way on foot. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah! I can walk lots if we need to!" the little girl said, taking a few deep breaths in through her nose to pump herself up. She seemed in full agreement with my plan, so I leaned forward to address our ride.

"Hey, Dramom! Could you land in that forest over there?" I yelled loudly so that she could hear me, and pointed to a forest not far from the capital.

"Understood, master," she said, and did as instructed.

Once we were on the ground, Aina, Suama, and I climbed down from Dramom's back and she morphed back into her human form. "Did you not want to go to that hume settlement, master?" she asked, looking a little confused by the change of plan.

"Well, yeah, but we can't have you flying right into the middle of the city," I explained. "The people there might get scared and attack us."

"Oh, please, master. Do you really think any humes stand a chance against me?" she said with a menacing chuckle.

"That grin of yours is a tad unsettling, you know," I pointed out. "Anyway, we didn't come to this city to fight. I have business here."

"Well, we would not be fighting for *long*..." she said pointedly with a shrug, then laughed some more.

Her smile's really starting to creep me out. "Best not to risk it," I said sternly.

All of a sudden, I heard wheezing from behind Dramom.

"Uh, Celes? A-Are you..." I hesitated. "Are you okay?"

She didn't answer.

"Should we take a break?" I tried again.

She was sprawled out on the ground, drenched in sweat and trying desperately to catch her breath. She was the only one who hadn't been allowed on Dramom's back and had literally been forced to fly solo the whole way here. I'd never seen anyone so desperate to get air into their lungs before and it made me very concerned for her. Was she going to survive?

WHEEZE
WHEEZE



“I’m... I’m...f-fine...” she managed to get out in between gasps for air. “D-Don’t...mind...me.”

“Yeah, I can’t really just ignore you. Are you *sure* you don’t want to take a break? It doesn’t look like you’re gonna be able to walk anytime soon. Can you even stand?” I asked, holding out a hand toward her. “Here, grab my hand. I’ll help you up.”

“I-I told you... I’m fine!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, slapping away my hand. “I... I can shtand...on my own...” I watched in awe as she somehow managed to get to her feet, though it was clear her breathing was still nowhere near back to normal and her speech had been affected too. “I... I don’t...need a bweak. L-Let’sh go, Sh-Shiro!” she declared resolutely as she set off toward the capital.

Or at least that was what I *assumed* she was trying to do, because she actually went off in completely the wrong direction. When I pointed this out to her, she treated me to a death glare, her face as red as a tomato.



I had a vague feeling there were monsters in the forest we’d landed in, but none attacked us, likely due to the presence of Dramom and Celes, though it was hard to say which one they were more afraid of, the dragon or the demon. Either way, we managed to make our way through the forest without running into any trouble and resumed our journey to the royal capital. Thirty minutes later, we were finally there.

The city was encircled by tall walls and there was a long line of people waiting to go in through the gate. It looked as though anyone who wanted to enter the city had to state their business to the guards stationed there. Now that I thought about it, the line to enter Mazela had been pretty long too, hadn’t it?

“Shiro, look! Th-There are so many humes here!” Patty whispered excitedly, poking her head out of Aina’s backpack. “Is there a festival today?”

Ninoritch was the only hume town Patty had ever been to, and it was a very small town, especially when compared to the capital. There must have been more people in this line than there were residents in Ninoritch, so it was only natural Patty would be surprised by the size of the crowd. I had to admit, I was kind of looking forward to her reaction when we actually got inside the city.

“Nope, no festival, boss. This is just a regular day here. The royal capital is the city with the largest number of people in the kingdom,” I explained. “Now, get back in Aina’s backpack before anyone sees you.”

“F-Fine,” the little fairy said, reluctantly withdrawing her head again, though she couldn’t resist the temptation of sneakily peeking out through the gap every now and again.



We joined the end of the line and I took a quick glance around. There were all kinds of people waiting to enter the city—merchants, pilgrims, adventurers—but I noticed there were very few beastfolk. I spotted the occasional dwarf and halfling, but the line was practically exclusively composed of humes.

“There are even more people here than there were in Mazela, Mister Shiro,” Aina noted.

She was holding Suama’s hand, and I could see that her eyes were sparkling with excitement. I also noticed her breathing had gotten a little ragged. *I must’ve looked just like that when I first went to Okinawa as a kid*, I thought.

“I hope we won’t have to wait too long,” she added.

I nodded. “I hope we won’t either.”

In fact, Aina and I were so excited, we had a hard time standing still as we waited for our turn.



The line inched forward at a steady rate, and before we knew it, we had almost reached the gate. I turned to my traveling companions and said, “All right, everyone, we’re almost at the gate. I have a few instructions for all of you, so listen up.” I cleared my throat and put on a serious expression, then looked at each of my companions’ faces in turn. “Listen closely. I don’t want *any* of you making a scene in front of the guards, you hear?”

“Okay!” Aina said, and she gave Suama’s hand a squeeze.

I peered at the little girl’s backpack and saw Patty nod at me through the gap. Well, that was the kids and Patty dealt with, at least. But I knew that was the easy part. I had to get it through the heads of the two potential troublemakers next.

“*Especially* you two,” I said pointedly as I turned toward the women. “You’d better be on your best behavior.”

“Who, me?” Celes asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Master, if I may say, I would prefer it if you refrained from lumping me in with this demon. It is rather vexing,” Dramom said, frowning.

I ignored their responses and fixed the demon with a pointed look. “Celes,” I said.

“What is it?”

“You will *not* lay a hand on the guards, you hear me? And whatever they ask you, you do *not* answer them. I’ll handle all the questions, so you just stand there and smile, okay?”

“Smile? L-Like this?” she asked as her mouth contorted upward into an awkward rictus grin.

I was silent for a good few seconds. “You know what? Forget smiling. On second thought, just put your hood up.”

She seemed displeased with this instruction, but she did as she was told all the same.

“And please, no matter what, do not say a thing,” I said, really driving the point home.

The demon scoffed. “You do not need to worry. You see, I asked someone to teach me about humes so that I would not be a burden to you on your travels. She even taught me what the proper etiquette was when entering a hume town.”

My eyes grew wide. “Really?” I asked, impressed by this display of initiative. “Who did you ask?”

“Emille, the rabbitwoman from the guild,” she answered proudly.

Oh jeez...

“Well, whatever she told you, I want you to do the *exact* opposite of it, okay? You somehow managed to ask the worst possible person in the whole of Ninoritch!”

Celes’s smile drooped, but I didn’t have time to go into more detail, so I turned to Dramom next.

“Dramom.”

“Yes, master?”

I pointed to her feet. “Could you stop hovering like that until we’re through the gate?”

“What an amusing joke, master!” she said with a laugh. “Whyever would I do that? My feet would get all dirty.”

In human form, Dramom always hovered a couple of centimeters off the ground as if she were a ghost, and even though we were in something of a fantasy world, this type of thing didn’t seem all that common here, so it’d definitely arouse suspicion if anyone were to notice.

“You made your clothes using magic, right? Can’t you make yourself some shoes as well? At least until we make it to the other side,” I insisted.

But it was too late.

“Next!” a voice called out from behind me.

It was our turn.

“What are you dillydallying for? Hurry it up already!” the voice called out again, a little more forcefully this time.

I took a deep breath, put on my best business smile, then turned

around. A beefy-looking guard was glaring at us from a couple of meters away.

"Oh, coming. C'mon, everyone," I said to my traveling companions, and we all strolled up to the guard post.

"One man, two women, and two children, huh? Interesting combination," the guard observed after glancing at us. "Where are you from?"

"From Ninoritch," I replied.

"Never heard of it. Where is it?" he said.

"Right on the eastern border of the kingdom."

A look of recognition flashed across his face. "Oh, right. Now that you mention it, there is a tiny town out there, isn't there?"

I nodded, my smile unwavering. "Yes. It's a very peaceful town with lots of amazing people in it."

"That so?" he said skeptically. "So what brings you all the way to the royal capital?"

"We're here in search of business opportunities," I said.

"Business opportunities?" the man asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes. I'm a merchant, you see."

I could've told him the truth and said I'd come to see a friend of mine, but I felt that would have just made him more suspicious of us. After all, the people of this world didn't tend to randomly travel such long distances simply to call in on friends. It was a good thing I was a merchant. I could use that to my advantage.

"And what's the deal with these kids?" the man asked, gesturing toward Aina and Suama. "They don't *look* like they're your daughters."

"Oh, these two?" I placed a hand on Aina's shoulder before continuing. "This one helps me out with my shop. She might be young, but she can already read, write, and even count."

"Really? That's impressive," the soldier remarked.

"Isn't it just? She's a very capable employee and a huge help to me," I said. I placed a hand on Suama's shoulder next. "And this one's still a bit on the young side at the moment, but she's going to work for me in the future too. Isn't that right, Suama?"

"Ai!" the little dragon girl squealed happily, and she even pumped her little fist.

"Is that so? Well, good luck to you, little girl," the soldier said to Suama.

"Ai!" she yipped, nodding vigorously.

Adorable. And the guard seemed to think so too, judging by the smile that had started to creep across his face. In fact, things seemed to be going pretty well. I started thinking we might be able to make it through the city gates pretty easily after all, and I was just about to

breathe a sigh of relief when the man turned to look at Celes and Dramom.

“And who are these two women?”

“My escort,” I said without missing a beat. My heart was pounding hard in my chest, but I didn’t let my panic show on my face.

“Your escort? So they’re adventurers?”

“Oh, no, not as such. They are very strong, though.”

The guard ruminated on this information. *Crap*, I thought. *He’s eyeing them really suspiciously. Especially Celes.*

“You,” he said, indicating the demon. “Pull down the hood.”

“Fine.”

She did as instructed, and I noticed that the man’s breath caught in his throat when he saw her face. I couldn’t blame him; Celes was drop-dead gorgeous.

“You don’t look like a bodyguard to me. You don’t seem to be carrying any kind of weapon, for starters,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “Are you—”

“Ah, wait, I can—” I started, but Celes talked over me.

“I know what it is you want,” she said slowly.

“What I want?” the guard spluttered. “What the hell are you suggest—”

“All of you are after the same thing. *This* is what you want, yes?” Celes said, a suspect smile flashing across her face as she produced a familiar-looking red crystal from her pocket. It was a red magic crystal, an incredibly valuable material only found on the island the demons inhabited. “No need to hold back,” she said to the guard. “I *know* you want it. Come, take—”

“Celes! What in the world are you *doing*?!” I cried out in horror. I grabbed her wrist and snatched the red magic crystal out of her hand. “I told you to leave this to me!”

“But Emille told me to do this,” Celes protested. “I believe it is known as ‘bribing.’”

“Yes, and it’s *illegal*! Don’t ever do it again!” I chastised her.

“F-Fine,” Celes said reluctantly. I handed the crystal back to her, and she put it in her pocket with a sullen look on her face.

I sighed and turned to the guard again. “Sorry about that. She’s still learning what common sense is,” I said.

“I-Is that so? Well, I guess that’s to be expected. You guys *are* from the back of beyond, after all,” the man said with a shrug. “I do have another question for you, though. Why is this woman floating?” he asked, pointing to Dramom.

She chuckled. “I see you are not very smart, unlike my master. If I were to walk on the ground, my feet would get—” Dramom started explaining, but I quickly cut her off.

“Sh-She’s a mage! A-And she’s, uh...” I racked my brain to try to invent an explanation on the spot. “Ah, right! It’s a form of magic training!”

“Really? I’ve heard levitation magic drains mana pretty fast. You guys sure have some weird training techniques out in the sticks, don’t you?” the guard remarked.

I let out a strained laugh. “Y-Yes, well, Ninoritch might be a very calm, peaceful little town, but there are some, um, *eccentric* individuals living there. Isn’t that right, Aina?”

The little girl jumped in surprise when I said her name, but quickly regained her composure and thankfully went along with my nonsensical explanation. “Y-Yes! Ninoritch is a really nice town, mister!”

My heart was beating like crazy in my chest, and I was pretty sure Aina was even more nervous than I was. The guard continued to eye us suspiciously as he leafed through our documents. We stood and waited in silence for a few seconds, though it felt like an eternity. *What if he doesn’t let us through? Actually, that would be a relatively positive outcome still. After those displays from Celes and Dramom, we might get taken away and interrogated or something!*

I felt like my heart was about to burst clean out of my chest, but then, all of a sudden, the man looked up at us from the documents he was scanning.

“Why didn’t you give this to me earlier?” he said, waving a piece of paper around in the air. “We wouldn’t have had to go through all that rigmarole if you had.”

It was the document Karen had given me that confirmed my identity and vouched for me. Thanks to that piece of paper, we were allowed into the city without further delay. *Thank you, Karen.*

Chapter Six: The Royal Capital's Many Dangers

We successfully made it through the gate and quickly found ourselves in the bustling heart of the royal capital. Patty and Aina's jaws hit the floor when they saw just how crowded the streets were.

"Wow, there are so many people!" the little girl breathed in amazement.

"Shiro! What's going on here? L-Look at how many people there are! Are you trying to tell me there are *this* many humes?" Patty screeched, pointing at the crowd.

It took no more than a quick glance around to tell me that the number of people in this city far exceeded the population of Mazela, and the streets were very animated, with merchants hawking their wares to passersby on every corner.

"Mister Shiro," Aina said, attempting to grab my attention.

"Hm? What is it, Aina?"

"Um, can I hold your hand? I don't want to get lost," she said with a shy look on her face.

I nodded. "Sure thing. Oh, but it means you won't be able to hold Suama's hand with all these people around."

"No, I can manage it!" the little girl insisted.

But I just shook my head. "If all three of us hold hands in a line, we'll end up taking up a lot of space and be an inconvenience to everyone else around us."

A look of understanding dawned on Aina's face. "Oh, you're right."

"Don't worry, though. I have the perfect solution," I said as I picked up Suama and turned to her mother. "Hey, Dramom, could you look after Suama for a bit?"

"Understood, master. Here, Suama, come to mother," Dramom said.

"Ai!" Suama squealed happily as I handed her over to her mother. "Ma-ma?"

"Yes? What is it, Suama?"

"I wike you!" Suama said, rubbing her cheek against Dramom's.

The scene was very heartwarming, and I turned back to Aina with a smile on my face. "Here, Aina," I said, holding my hand out for her.

"Kay!" She grabbed my hand and gripped it tightly. "Thank you,

Mister Shiro,” she said, giggling adorably.

“You’re very welcome, Aina,” I said. “All righty. Should we start our search for Zidan now?”

“Yeah!” Aina replied enthusiastically.

And so, with my hand tightly clutching Aina’s much smaller one, we set off for the inn Zidan had mentioned in his letter.



In his letter, Zidan had told me that he was staying at an inn called the Thunderbird’s Roost. Since we didn’t know where anything was in the royal capital, we decided to ask various people we passed for directions.

“The Thunderbird’s Roost? It’s right down this road.”

“Hm? The Thunderbird’s Roost, ye say? I think there’s an inn named that over on East Street. What? Ye wanna know how to get to East Street? Just hang a left at that corner, then turn right at the end of the road.”

“Huh? The Thunderbird’s Roost? No, it’s in the opposite direction. Oh, but if you’re looking for an inn to stay in, a good friend of mine owns one not too far from here. It’s much, much better than the Thunderbird’s Roost, and—sorry? Oh, right. Your friend’s waiting for you there. Yes, I see. Well, anyway, it’s on West Street. Bye now.”

“You’re looking for the Thunderbird’s Roost? Oh, sure, I’ve heard of it. Plenty of beastfolk choose to stay there. I have a buddy who’s a dogman, and he told me—hm? What do you mean, ‘Get to the point’? Why are you in such a hurry? Fine, suit yourself. It’s on South Street. To get there, you have to...”

We’d followed the instructions of the first person we’d asked, but couldn’t seem to find the inn anywhere, no matter how hard we looked, so we’d ended up asking someone else, who sent us in a completely different direction. Once we got to the street in question, we again couldn’t find the inn, and were forced to ask a *third* person, who directed us to another street, and so, the cycle continued.

“Where are we?”

After asking for directions for a seventh time, we had somehow ended up on the farthest outskirts of the city, where the general vibe was a world away from what it had been in the center of the capital. Here, it was quiet to the point where you could almost describe it as desolate, and the buildings were all really run-down. The only people we came across were shady-looking beastfolk.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina whined.

I gently patted her on the head. “It’s okay, Aina. There’s nothing to be scared of,” I said, trying to reassure her. “Though, just in case we need to backtrack in a hurry, let’s try to remember the route we

took to get—”

I didn't manage to finish my sentence because I was interrupted by a piercing cry.

“Hey, let...” a voice cried out. “Let go of me! How dare you!”

The voice sounded like it belonged to a girl, and a very young one at that. A crude laugh that clearly belonged to a man followed her protests, echoing around the quiet street.

“C'mon, little missy, don'tcha know ya ain't s'posed to wander 'round 'ere all by yerself? *'Specially* when yer wearin' such expensive-lookin' clothes.”

“He's right,” another male voice agreed. “Don'tcha know there's loadsa shady people in these parts?”

“Yup. Shady people like *us*!” a third said, eliciting loud guffaws from his buddies.

“Howzabout ya come with us, little missy?”

“No! I don't want to! Let go of me!” the little girl cried out again.

I looked around. *Where are those voices coming from?* I wondered. But no matter how hard I looked and strained my ears, the streets in this part of town were so twisting, it was hard to pinpoint the source of the voices.

“Mister Shiro, there! A hat!” Aina said, pointing to a blue beret on the ground. It was made of very fine fabric, which suggested it must have been pretty expensive.

“They must be over this way, then!” I declared, and before I knew it, I was running down the street.

“Ah! Mister Shiro!” Aina called out to me from where I'd just been standing.

It looked like she was about to come running after me, so I quickly turned around and shouted to her to stay put.

“B-But...” she started to protest.

“Don't worry about me!” I called back to her. “Celes, Dramom, please stay here and look after Aina and Suama for a bit. Boss, come with me!”

“Y-You can count on me!” Patty replied, and I sensed her fly up behind me.

I rounded the corner and found myself on a dimly lit street. I dashed past a few broken wooden boxes that lay strewn across the ground and continued making my way toward where the voices were coming from. It sounded like I was getting closer and closer. I turned a corner, then another, and finally arrived on the scene.

“I told you to let go of me!”

“Just come with us. It'll be fun, I promise!”

“No chance!”

A group of petty thugs appeared to be trying to carry off a little

girl, with one of them tugging her by the arm, attempting to drag her away through the maze of streets. The girl seemed to be roughly the same age as Aina, and she was wearing an outfit the exact same shade of blue as the beret we'd found lying on the ground, suggesting it had come as a set. Just like the hat, the little girl's clothes were quite visibly made of good-quality material, and she wore a large ribbon at the base of her neck. It was clear she was from a rich family.

"Don't be so scared! We ain't gonna eat ya. We just want yer parents to give us a li'l bit of pocket money, ya know?" one of the thugs said.

The little girl must have struggled with the men to the point of making her hat fall off, and it looked like her hair had gotten all mussed up in the process. The word "kidnapping" flashed in front of my mind's eye.

"Hey, boss, could you sneak up behind those guys?" I asked Patty.

"Of course I can! I'm a fairy! That's a piece of cake for me!" she replied, immediately ducking into the shadow of one of the buildings to get behind the thugs.

I had a plan. I was going to yell at the top of my lungs to distract the thugs so that Patty could attack them from behind. I took a deep breath and was just about to put my plan into motion when all of a sudden, the little girl spotted me. Our eyes met, and she immediately started yelling over to me.

"You there! Don't just stand there and watch! Help me right this instant!"

I was so taken aback by her rather brusque, demanding tone, it took me a good five seconds to process what she'd just said.

"What are you doing? Come on, come on! Do something already!" she pressed me. "I told you to help me! Are you deaf? Don't you understand what I'm saying?"

In spite of the position she found herself in, the little girl wasn't *asking* for my help so much as *demanding* I go save her. She might have been around Aina's age, but she seemed a lot more bratty—uh, *strong-willed*, I should say. And it seemed I wasn't the only one surprised by her words. The thugs were also wide-eyed at the little girl's display of arrogance—uh, *desperation*. Their eyes darted back and forth between the girl and me, their confusion writ large on their faces. Though her attitude wasn't altogether appropriate for the situation, it still worked to my advantage, because the thugs' attention was firmly on me, and I could see that Patty was almost in position. I hadn't even needed to yell. All I needed to do now was buy a little more time and my plan would go off without a hitch.

Get it together, Shiro! I told myself before jumping out of the shadows of the rundown building I'd been hiding in and clearing my

throat loudly.

“Hey, you three! What are you doing over there?” I called out, jabbing an accusatory finger toward the thugs.

“Who the hell are *you*?” spat a lizardman with tattoos all over his face who fixed me with a mean glare.

“Just a merchant who happened to be passing by,” I said.

“A merchant, huh?” the lizardman replied. “And what business have ya got with us?”

“Oh, it’s rather simple. I want you to let go of her,” I said, gesturing to the girl.

The second thug—a dogman—burst into earsplitting laughter. “Ya really think we’re gonna let her go just ‘cause ya asked us *nicely*?” he chortled.

“Now listen here, Mr. Merchant. If ya don’t want us to beat ya up, ya better scram. And I mean right now!” the tattooed lizardman threatened me.

But I had no intention of backing down. These guys didn’t scare me one bit. After all, ever since coming to this world, I’d encountered my fair share of dangerous foes, and these petty thugs were nothing compared to them. Heck, Celes was way more intimidating than these guys!

“So you don’t plan to release her, huh? Well, you guys do seem pretty stupid, so I’m not sure why I even bothered asking. I mean, do you even understand what I’m saying? Or is this all just a bit too difficult for you?” I said with an exaggerated shrug, shaking my head as if I was exasperated. It was obvious I was just trying to provoke these dumbos, but they fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

“What the hell did ya just say?!” the tattooed lizardman snapped.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Patty sneaking up behind them. She was almost ready to pounce. “Aw, getting all worked up, are we? Well, I guess even intellectually *challenged* folk like yourselves can use a fraction of your cognitive abilities. Emphasis on ‘a fraction’ there,” I said, punctuating my goading with a muffled chuckle.

These guys must have been particularly sensitive because they instantly flew into a fit of rage at my jibes.

“Yer dead!” cried the lizardman.

“I’m gonna kill ya!” the dogman barked.

The pair produced knives from their pockets.

“We’re gonna make mincemeat outta ya!”

“Yer gonna become pig food!”

And with that, they leaped toward me. Or at least they tried. They’d only been standing around three meters away from me by that point, but I’d been ready for them.

“Take this! Pssst!” I shouted, imitating the sound of the pepper

spray I'd just taken out of my inventory and was blasting in the faces of the thugs. This spray was the kind designed to ward off molesters and other kinds of ne'er-do-wells, so it was much weaker than the bear deterrent I'd used on the murder grizzlies back in the forest that one time. Even so, it was more than strong enough to make them drop their weapons and roll around on the ground in pain, clutching their faces.

"Aaargh! My nose! My nose!"

"My eyes! My eyes!"

Okay, two down, one to go. The third thug—a bald male hume—was still clutching the little girl's arm, clearly at a loss over what to do after seeing what had just happened to his partners in crime. This was the perfect opportunity to rescue the girl.

"Boss, now!" I yelled, and Patty flew out of the shadows. She pointed a tiny finger at the man, ready to unleash her magic on him, when all of a sudden, tragedy struck.

"I *said* let me go!" the little girl huffed before delivering a kick squarely to the man's groin. And when I say a kick, I mean a *kick*. She didn't hold back or hesitate in the slightest.

The man let out an agonized cry, and a twinge of pain reflexively coursed through my own nether regions. That kick must have hurt like *hell*. The last of the thugs collapsed to the ground to a soundtrack of incoherent groans.

"I bet you regret crossing me now!" the little girl stated triumphantly before proceeding to trample all over the fallen men and spit on them.

Holy moly, what an ill-mannered child.

"Serves you right! I hope you've learned your lesson. You're lucky I'm letting you get away with just that. And *you!*" she barked, glaring at me.

"Who, me?" I said, feigning ignorance.

"Yes, you!" she said, pointing a little finger at me and walking toward me. "What were you doing, standing there like a gormless idiot? Why didn't you come over and help me out sooner?"

"You know, people don't usually give lip to the person who just saved them," I said pointedly.

"Do you have a problem with it? Anyway, I didn't even *need* your help in the first place, dum-dum. I could've escaped all by myself!" she retorted before huffily turning her head.

I was completely taken aback by her attitude, and it seemed I wasn't the only one, because Patty was staring at the scene open-mouthed. Well, it was likely she was still in shock at the little girl flooring that thug just as she was about to cast a spell at him, but she was also undoubtedly every bit as surprised by the girl's brattiness as I

was. Yup, you heard that right. Even motormouth Patty Falulu was at a loss for words.

At any rate, I figured it would cause more trouble than it was worth if the girl noticed Patty hovering behind her, so I quickly gestured at the little fairy to hide. Patty recovered her senses and ducked back into the shadows.

The little girl, on the other hand, seemingly wasn't done with me. She stared at me with curiosity before opening her mouth again.

"Anyway, you..."

"Shiro Amata," I stated simply.

"What?" she said, a confused look on her face.

"That's my name," I said.

"Oh. What a strange name. Well, anyway, Amata..." There was no "Mr.," no nothing. Just my last name.

Judging by the quality of her clothing in addition to her aloof attitude, it was pretty obvious this kid was from a wealthy family. She might even have been a noble. A while back, Raiya had told me nobles were "a bunch of snobs," so it'd make sense if this girl was from a noble family.

"You can call me Shiro," I offered.

The little girl glared at me. "Who do you think you are, talking back to me like that? I just called you 'Amata,' didn't I? Then you should accept that. You got that, Amata?"

"Yes, Your Highness," I said, laying it on thick. "What can this humble servant do for you?"

But the little girl didn't bat an eye at the "Your Highness" part, and simply nodded approvingly. "I dropped my hat earlier," she continued. "Go fetch it for me. Oh, and I'm hungry, so you had better find me something to eat."

Not only had she not even bothered to thank me for saving her from those thugs, she was also treating me like a servant. I didn't have time to say anything in response, though, as just at that moment, Aina and the others rounded the corner and joined us, the little girl clutching the lost blue beret in her hands.

Chapter Seven: The Spoiled Brat

“Thanks for yer patience. Enjoy yer meal!” the waitress said as she set a bunch of plates down on our table.

After rescuing the girl, the six of us had headed back to the main street and found a random restaurant to eat in, because our new charge kept going on about how hungry she was. We were presently seated at a long, rectangular table that was absolutely covered with all kinds of different dishes. Since I knew how much Celes and Dramom were likely to wolf down, I’d made sure to order large quantities of practically every dish on the menu.

“All right, everyone, dig in,” I said.

“So this is what commoners eat, is it? Looks disgusting,” remarked the girl clad in blue from head to toe, her little nose wrinkling.

I noticed that even with her hat on, her hair was still sticking out in every direction. Her hair must have just been naturally frizzy, I guessed. Maybe wearing a hat that was much too big for her was her attempt to keep her unruly hair in check.

“Well, you won’t know how it tastes until you actually try some. You might find you like it,” I said.

“I doubt it will suit my refined palate, but I suppose I’ll give it a try if it makes you happy,” she replied.

“Gee, thanks.” I said before turning to my companions. “Anyway, you can all start eating now.”

That was our cue to start reaching for food. I put some food on a plate for Suama, and Aina sneakily dropped a few morsels into her backpack for Patty. For a while, all that could be heard was the steady, rhythmic sound of chewing and swallowing as we all enjoyed our food in silence. No one was talking. Why, you might ask? Well...

“I was right. This tastes disgusting!”

No one knew quite how to deal with the bratty girl we had picked up along the way.

“I feel bad for you commoners. You have to eat this junk every day.”

The way she threw the word “commoner” around so casually pretty much confirmed that my initial theory had been bang on the money and this kid was in fact from a noble family. Who would have guessed I would end up babysitting a noble’s kid on my first day in the royal capital? I hoped no one would get the mistaken impression that I

was trying to kidnap her, though in truth, I had more pressing issues to deal with just at that moment. I quickly glanced across at Dramom, who had a serene smile on her face like always, but I could see the vein on her forehead was pulsating. Yup, she was angry all right.

“Master,” she said.

“What is it, Dramom?”

“This hume youngling is being disrespectful toward you,” she stated.

“Is she? Oh well. She’s just a kid. It’s fine,” I said.

“That attitude is inexcusable. Master, may I have your permission to eliminate her?”

“No, you may *not*!” I replied firmly.

“But I have been told that humes discipline their offspring by ‘punishing’ them. I believe this particular youngling requires a *lot* of disciplining.”

“I said no. Besides, we’re adults. We can’t let a kid’s attitude get under our skin,” I explained.

“Amata,” piped up the subject of our conversation. “These dishes all taste bad. Get me something else.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Why aren’t you answering me? I told you to bring me something else. You commoners really are slow on the uptake, aren’t you?”

“S-Stay calm, Shiro, stay calm. Patience is the name of the game. Patience with a capital P,” I muttered to myself.

“Master, you merely have to give the order, and I shall take care of her for you. I will eliminate her, along with everyone else in this settlement,” Dramom stated, her tone ice-cold.

“Don’t you think that’s a little *too* harsh a punishment?” I remarked.

The girl’s obnoxious attitude and Dramom’s foul mood had made the atmosphere around the table extremely tense.

“Get it together, Shiro,” I muttered to myself, then merrily announced, “Come on, everyone. Eat up while it’s still hot!”

I succeeded in smoothing over the situation and we all resumed our meal. Now I just needed to do something to fix the general mood. After all, the Amata family motto was: *Dinner should always be accompanied by laughter!*

“Thinking about it, I haven’t asked your name yet,” I said to the little girl. “What should we call you?” I figured asking her name was probably a pretty harmless way to kick off a conversation.

“I don’t want to tell you,” she retorted defiantly. “Why *should* I give my name to a bunch of commoners?”

And just like that, my attempt to strike up a conversation had been promptly shut down. It sounded like this kid had no intention of

engaging in chitchat with us.

“Well, if you don’t tell us, we won’t know what to call you,” I said, trying to reason with her. “Or would you rather we came up with a name for you instead?”

The little girl didn’t say anything in response, but I could see a pout forming on her face. I wasn’t ready to give up just yet, though.

“Let’s see...” I mused. “How about we call you Teapot Hanasaka?”

I figured I’d keep on suggesting weird names until she couldn’t take it anymore and told us her real name to shut me up.

“What a great suggestion, master!” Dramom piped up.

“Are you making fun of me?” the little girl asked with a frown.

“Are you saying you are unsatisfied with the name my master has bestowed upon you, youngling? I will have you know that my master comes up with the best names! He is the one who gave me my name of ‘Dramom,’ and I now wear it with pride.”

It seemed my little plan had taken an unexpected turn. *Also, might I remind you that you weren’t exactly thrilled with the name I’d picked for you at first, Dramom? Oh, and for the umpteenth time, “Dramom” is just a temporary nickname!*

“‘Dramom’? What a ridiculous name!” the little girl scoffed. “This guy really has zero taste in names, doesn’t he?”

“Do not speak of my master that way! I will not let you slander him. Know your place!” Dramom huffed, and it was clear she was fuming.

“Know *my* place?” the little girl retorted. “Do you have any idea who I am?”

The two of them were staring daggers at one another. I’d resorted to cradling my head in my hands, feeling more and more desperate about the whole situation, when I heard Celes speak up.

“Is it really so hard for the two of you to converse without yelling?” she said to Dramom and the little girl.

“Demon, do you not have something to say to this human youngling? She is insulting the master! Do I have to remind you that he is also *your* master?” Dramom said pointedly.

Celes scoffed. “She is a mere child. Shiro is right. You cannot let a child’s words get under your skin,” she remarked before stabbing a chunk of meat with her fork and bringing it up to her mouth. After swallowing it down, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then continued. “And besides, fearless children like this one make the best warriors. After all, she is talking back to *you*, the Immortal Dragon. I see a great future ahead of her.”

A smile had spread across Celes’s face. Not only had she *not* scolded the girl, she had even praised her and gone as far as saying she should look forward to a “great future.” *If all devil children are like*

that, remind me never to visit Celes's homeland, I thought to myself. But I noticed that after hearing Celes's praise for her attitude, the little girl had lowered her head to hide her reddening face. Oh me, oh my. Could it be that a certain someone liked being complimented? Her attitude might be what it is, but she's still just a normal kid at the end of the day, huh? I definitely should take advantage of that.

"You have a point there, Celes," I said. "I mean, she didn't cry once when those thugs confronted her and she even tried to fight them off. I'm sure there aren't many kids who would be able to do that."

"Oh? It sounds as though she already has a predisposition for fighting. I look forward to seeing what the future holds for her," Celes remarked, and the little girl's face went even redder.

She was quiet for a few seconds more, then finally she mumbled, "Shess."

"Hm?"

"Shess," the little girl repeated. "That's my name."

"Shess, huh? That's a pretty name," I said.

"I-I don't usually tell people my name, so you'd better be thankful!" the little girl said hurriedly.

"I am," I assured her. "Thank you for telling us your name, Shess."

As she had done earlier, she huffed haughtily and turned her head to the side. That must have been her way of hiding her embarrassment.

"More importantly, Amata, when are you going to get me something else to eat?" Shess asked, pushing away the plate in front of her. "Tell them to bring me something tastier! Let's see..." She paused to think about what she wanted. "I'd like soup. Tell them to bring me some soup!"

To my utter surprise, Aina was the one who answered Shess. The little girl had remained quiet the whole time, but when she finally spoke, I could see that her face was a little on the stern side. She seemed almost angry, which was very rare for her.

"Shess," she said.

"What is it?" the other little girl sniffed haughtily.

"Not finishing your food is bad," Aina said.

Shess stared at her in silence, so Aina continued, "I don't think you understand how happy people are just to have food at all. You're very lucky that you have food in front of you right now."

Aina put down her fork and stared at the other girl. "Listen closely to what I have to tell you, Shess," she said slowly, as if talking to a child much younger than herself. "There was a time when I never had enough food to eat and I was always hungry. But thanks to Mister Shiro, I get to eat food every day now. And that makes me really

happy.”

She paused and picked up the plate Shess had pushed away. “There are lots of people out there who don’t have food. But you do. And because of that, you have to finish everything that’s on your plate,” the little girl summarized, placing the plate in front of Shess again. “Let’s eat this meal together, okay?”

Once again, Shess stayed silent.

“Food tastes better when you share it with others. Did you know that, Shess?” Aina asked, a huge grin on her face.

Shess lowered her head again and muttered, “F-Fine. I’ll finish what’s on my plate if you insist.”

And with that, she resumed eating the food she had initially pushed away.



Once the six of us were all done eating, we left the restaurant and stumbled across a rather *interesting* scene.

“Pri—uh, my ladyyy! Pri—uh, I mean, my ladyyy! Where are youuuuu?”

Across the street, there was a young woman who was calling out to some “lady.” She looked about twenty, give or take a year or two (I was pretty sure she was younger than me, at least), and she was tall, slender, and had short hair. She wasn’t wearing any fancy accessories, but a sword noticeably hung from her hip. A swordswoman, huh?

“Pri—uh, my ladyyy!” the swordswoman yelled as she walked. “Luza’s over here waiting for you! I’m not going to scold you, so please stop hidi—ah!” She had accidentally bumped into someone. “O—Oh, I apologize. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going,” she said, bowing her head to the person she had collided with.

She resumed walking around and yelling, only to bump into another passerby. This time, however, she ended up losing her balance, staggering for a few steps before somehow tripping over her own leg and falling flat on her face with a yelp. There was a loud thud as she hit the ground. *Ouch. That must’ve hurt. She seems pretty clumsy.*

The swordswoman groaned. “That hurt...” she whined, sitting up and hugging her knees.

I felt my body wince in sympathy, with my chest in particular feeling a little tight. I decided I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing, so I made my way over to her and was about to help her back to her feet, when all of a sudden, an indignant voice called out to the clumsy swordswoman from beside me.

“Luza! That’s disgraceful behavior! What are you doing, sobbing your eyes out in public like that?!” Shess scolded the poor swordswoman, glaring down at her with her hands on her hips.

“Um, do you know this woman, Shess?” I asked the little girl.

“Yes. She’s my escort.”

“Your escort? I didn’t know you had one,” I said in mild surprise.

Hold on a minute. If Shess has an escort, how’d she end up getting dragged into that back alley by those thugs? I wondered. And c’mon, kid. If she’s your escort, you could at least help her up.

“My ladyyyy!” Shess’s escort—who was apparently called Luza—started wailing, pulling me out of my thoughts. In fact, she was full-on crying by this point, her face all scrunched up as she flung her arms around Shess’s midsection. “I’m so glad you’re alive! So, so glaaaad!”

“Hey, l-let go of me!” Shess protested. “Don’t cling to me in the middle of the street like that. It’s embarrassing!”

“My ladyyyy!”

It was a good five minutes before Luza stopped crying.



“Thank you for looking after the pri—I mean, my lady,” Luza said to us once she’d finally stopped crying. “Here, please accept this.” She produced a leather pouch from her pocket, which I presumed was a coin purse.

“Oh, no need for that,” I said hurriedly, attempting to stop her, but she simply shook her head.

“It’ll dent my pride if you don’t accept. I fully intend on compensating you for all your trouble, whether you like it or not,” she insisted, then she opened her leather pouch and emptied the contents into her hand. Three copper coins tumbled out. Luza’s face turned as red as a tomato. “C’mon, c’mon!” she said, shaking the pouch vigorously. But no matter how hard she shook, no more coins fell out.

Luza seemed at a total loss for words. Her entire body was trembling, but not a single sound made it out of her mouth. I didn’t know what to say either. We continued awkwardly glancing at each other in complete silence for a few seconds until Luza finally thrust the three copper coins toward me.

“H-Here! Take them!”

When I didn’t immediately move to take them off her, she thrust them toward me even more insistently.

“Uh, how can I put this?” I said awkwardly. “It feels a bit wrong taking those from you. I mean, you won’t have anything left if I do. It’d be cruel, and sort of like telling you to go jump off a cliff, you know?”

“I-It’s fine! Just take them!” Luza said before grabbing my hand and pressing the coins into my palm. “All right, debt paid!” She paused, glanced at me, and went even redder. “Wh-Why are you making that face? I’ve paid my debt, haven’t I?”

“Ah, y-yes,” I said, deciding to go along with it.

“Good! Well then. Let’s go, pri—uh, my lady!”

Luza grabbed Shess by the hand and went to leave. As the little girl was guided away, she turned toward us, glanced at Aina, and opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, but then closed it again after a few seconds. The pair disappeared into the crowd and I lost sight of them. I’d saved a little girl from thugs who were trying to kidnap her, fed her, and Aina had taught her a life lesson, and our compensation for all of that had ended up being three copper coins, which was equivalent to three hundred yen.

Chapter Eight: My Reunion with Zidan

After Shess and Luza had departed, the five of us wandered around the royal capital for a little while longer until we at last managed to find the Thunderbird's Roost.

"Well, damn. This inn is gigantic compared to the one back in Ninoritch. That's the royal capital for you, I guess," I commented.

The Thunderbird's Roost was incredibly luxurious. From the perspective of a born-and-bred Japanese guy like me, it looked more like a proper hotel than an inn. We walked up to the reception desk and told the receptionist we had come to see Zidan. She conveyed our message, and not even a minute passed before Zidan came rushing down the stairs.

"Shiro? How are you here? I only sent you that letter two weeks ago! How are you already in the royal capital? What's going on?" he asked me, his eyes wide as saucers. Though, since he was an owlman, his eyes were always pretty wide, but you get the picture.

"Hey, Zidan, it's been a while. I think the last time I saw you was when you came to Ninoritch to stock up on shampoo, wasn't it?" I said, shaking his hand. I really, *really* wanted to pet his fluffy feathers, but I just about managed to restrain myself. Barely.

"It *has* been a while, hasn't it? Oh, and you've brought Aina with you too. How ya doing, kiddo?"

"I'm good!" the little girl said, beaming at him.

"And what about you, Suama?" the owlman said, turning to the little dragon girl.

Suama nodded. "Ai!"

"Well, that's great," Zidan said, smiling at the two girls, before his attention was drawn to Celes and Dramom. "Hm? I don't think I've seen these two before," he said.

"Let me introduce you, then," I said. "The one looking all sullen is Celesdia, and the smiling one is Suama's mother. It's a bit of a long story, but we call her Dramom."

"D-Dramom? That's an *interesting* name," Zidan remarked.

"As I said, it's a long story."

"I-I see," Zidan said, looking a little confused. "Well, I'm Zidan. It's nice to meet you two ladies."

Now that the introductions had been dealt with, we all went up to

Zidan's room at the inn. He was staying in one of the best rooms in the place, and once we crossed the threshold, I realized it was actually a full-on suite. We put our stuff down and made ourselves comfortable on the sofas. I let Patty out of Aina's bag and introduced her to Zidan, who couldn't believe his eyes. Though I couldn't blame him for that, because it wasn't every day you got to see a fairy, even in this world.

"I'm so glad you made it to the royal capital, Shiro," the owlman said.

"Well, I could hardly *not* come. After all..." I paused and fished the letter he had sent me out of my pocket. "You need my help, right?"

"Precisely! Thank goodness you understood my hidden message. Not that I doubted it for one second, of course," Zidan said.

"Well, I *did* tell you to only use that letter set when it's an emergency, so it didn't take a genius to figure out that something was up." I chuckled. "So? What can I do for you?"

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," he replied.

"Someone you'd like *me* to meet?" I repeated, blinking in surprise. "And who might that be?"

"Are you ready for this? You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you."

Even though we were in a private room, the owlman leaned forward and whispered in my ear the name of the mysterious person he wanted me to meet.



The following day, Zidan and I made our way to the royal palace, while the others stayed at the inn. It had only been a day since Aina and I had fantasized about visiting the royal palace, but at the time, I'd had no idea that I would actually get the chance to do so, and especially not so soon. I made a quick mental note to be extra observant so that I could tell Aina all about what it was like in the castle. But for the moment, I needed to stay focused on the task at hand.

Zidan cleared his throat next to me. "L-L-Let me introduce you to—ah! I forgot the 'please'! Please let me—no, no, 'allow' me! Please *allow* me to introduceth..." He paused once more and shook his head. He was shaking like a leaf as he repeatedly attempted to introduce me to the woman seated in front of us. "Please allowst me to introduceth..." Pause. Try again. "Please allowst me to introduceth thee to..." Pause. "Argh! I don't know!"

Zidan had been attempting to introduce me for a couple of minutes, starting a sentence, fumbling over his words, then trying again. He was trying to speak in a more refined way than usual, but he was obviously struggling with it. I was pretty sure that in all of his

attempts, he hadn't once managed to even make it to the first syllable of my name before getting confused and starting again. At the present moment, the two of us were sitting in the parlor of the royal palace. Five maids stood along the wall beside us, and a woman was seated on the sofa opposite us, with a guard in full armor standing right behind her.

"Please do not be so nervous. After all, I am the one who invited the two of you here," the woman said in a gentle voice.

As you have probably guessed by now, this woman was the queen of the kingdom, Anielka Something-Something Giruam (Zidan had told me her name before we got here). But even though she was the queen, she was only a year older than me. She was incredibly gorgeous, with long, flowing hair, and eyes the color of emeralds.

"B-But, my queen, I don't wish to seem impolite!" Zidan protested.

"We are not meeting in an official capacity, so you may relax," the queen told him. "Besides, I am not here as the 'queen' today, but as a mother who seeks your help." She paused briefly, then continued with a gentle smile on her face. "And to be completely honest with you, I am not fond of formality."

Well, it would be rude of us to insist on speaking to her super formally if that was how she felt.

"Is that so? Well, I must say I'm glad to hear that, because I'm not big on it either," I said with an airy chuckle.

What can I say? Ever since I'd started hanging out with a demon, and perhaps even worse, the Immortal Dragon herself, I'd become a lot bolder and more unabashed than before.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Queen Anielka," I said. "I am Shiro Amata, Shiro being my first name and Amata my family name. I am a merchant registered to the merchant guild that is run by my good friend Zidan right here, the Eternal Promise."

Zidan gawked at me, utterly shocked by how informally I was speaking to the queen, and I noticed that even the guard was frowning at me. The queen, on the other hand, chuckled softly. She didn't seem at all mad, so that was good.

"Might I ask why you've summoned me here today, Your Majesty?" I asked.

"Of course." She paused and looked me straight in the eye as she outlined her request. "I would like you to find a dress for my daughter."



In this kingdom, when a noble child reached the age of eight, their family would throw a grand ball to celebrate the occasion. In a way, it was somewhat similar to the Shichi-Go-San ceremony in

Japan, where parents of children aged three, five, or seven dressed their little ones in a kimono and took them to a shrine, or the new thing that had started gaining in popularity in recent years, the half-coming-of-age ceremony that was organized to celebrate children turning ten. I'd initially assumed this ball would be a pretty lighthearted affair, but I quickly found out this couldn't be further off from the truth. You see, all of the participants in these types of balls were other nobles and members of royalty, and rather than simply celebrating the child's birthday, the youngster would be subjected to intense scrutiny, with their behavior, speech, dancing ability, and anything else you could think of being evaluated. Some parents even used the opportunity to find a prospective partner for their precious offspring, especially if that child was a girl. Even though Queen Anielka was the wife of the ruler of the kingdom, she was still first and foremost a mother. All she wanted was for her daughter to make a good impression with the other nobles at her first ball.

"I understand," I said. "I just have one question, though. Why do you want *me* to find a dress for the princess? I'm just a merchant. Surely there are at least a handful of skilled dressmakers in the royal capital, right?"

"My, oh my, do you really not know?" the queen said, a smile appearing on her face.

"I mean..."

To be honest, I *did* have an inkling why she had summoned me specifically to help her out with this. You see, a couple of months back, I'd furnished Karen with a dress to wear to Lord Bashure's banquet in Mazela. Though calling it a "dress" was a bit misleading, because it was a full-on magical girl cosplay outfit. But, in fairness, Karen had been the one to select it out of lots of other dresses I'd shown her. I had thought everyone would make fun of her at the banquet, but I couldn't have been more wrong, because they had all loved the costume, and Karen had spent the whole night surrounded by noble ladies who were constantly showering her with compliments about her beautiful dress.

"Charlotte was the person who told me about you, you see," the queen said.

"Charlotte? Who's that?" I asked, a little confused.

"Lord Bashure's wife," she replied.

"Oh, the *countess*!" I said, remembering whom she meant. "I see."

Apparently, Queen Anielka had gotten talking to the other noble ladies about how much she wanted her daughter's ball debut to be just perfect, and on hearing this, the countess had told the queen all about the dress Karen had worn at the earl's banquet.

"There is a merchant registered to one of the guilds in Mazela who

sells dresses so beautiful, they turn anyone who wears one into the goddess of beauty!" the countess had said, and naturally, the queen had been rather intrigued by this nugget of information.

"When she told me that, I immediately dispatched a messenger to bring the head of that merchant guild here to the royal capital," the queen explained.

"And since I don't know a thing about dresses, I sent you that letter," Zidan added.

So as it turned out, it really *was* related to the dress I'd gotten for Karen.

"I will properly compensate you for your cooperation, naturally," Queen Anielka told me. She paused and glanced at Zidan, who nodded and then turned to me.

"Her Majesty has said she will let us open a branch of the guild in the royal capital if you help her," he told me.

"A branch of the Eternal Promise in the *royal capital*?" I said in awe.

The queen simply smiled at me and nodded.

So I'd really be able to sell my wares in the royal capital without having to jump through all the hoops and whatever? I was still slightly traumatized by what had happened the last time I'd tried to do business in a town that wasn't Ninoritch.

"Under normal circumstances, only merchants with special authorization can do business here," the queen explained. "However, if you agree to help me, I will personally grant you that authorization and spare you the need to go through the application process."

She paused and waited for my answer.

"Please, Shiro! We're never gonna get an opportunity like this again!" Zidan pleaded with me. "Discrimination against nonhumans is so rampant in the capital, they'd never let me open a branch of my guild here normally. I want to prove to these jackasses that we birdmen—and beastfolk in general—have what it takes to be successful in business too!" There was a fire in his eyes, and I couldn't recall ever seeing him looking as serious as he did just then. It seemed he really, *really* wanted to open a branch of his guild here.

I let out a long, pensive "Hmmm..." and crossed my arms. It was certainly an appealing offer. After all, there were so many people in the capital, I was in no doubt that my sales would skyrocket if I started selling my wares here. Sure, it was pretty far from Ninoritch, but that wasn't all that much of a concern, because I could always ask Dramom to bring me to the capital whenever I needed to restock. But most importantly of all, I could see just how much Zidan wanted this. He was absolutely determined to change the way people in the royal capital viewed beastfolk so that they wouldn't have to face so much

discrimination in the future.

“Shiro, allow me to reiterate my request. Could you please provide my daughter with a dress for her debut ball?” the queen asked, looking me straight in the eye.

I was still finding it hard to believe that the queen herself—one of the most powerful people in the kingdom—was asking for *my* help. Me, of all people.

“Shiro, please, *please* say yes,” Zidan said, bowing his head.

But most importantly of all, my friend needed my help. So why was I hesitating?

“I understand,” I said, then paused as I straightened up in my seat. “I will prepare a dress for the princess to wear to the ball.”

As soon as she heard my answer, a delighted smile spread across the queen’s face. She stood up, came over to me, and clasped my hands between hers.

“Thank you so very much, Shiro. I shall call my daughter in right away!”

She turned to one of her servants and instructed her to fetch the princess. The maid bowed, mumbled a demure “Yes, Your Majesty,” then left the room. When she returned a few minutes later, she had a young girl with her.

“As you requested, I have brought Her Highness the princess here, Your Majesty,” the servant declared.

I turned toward the doorway and my jaw hit the floor. “What? Y-You’re...” I stuttered, unable to stop myself.

“Y-You’re...” the princess stammered back. She seemed just as shocked as I was.

And why were we both shocked, you might ask? Well, it’s because the person who had just entered the room was none other than Shess, the girl I had rescued from potential kidnappers the previous day.

Chapter Nine: Princess Shessfelia

Shess stared at me with eyes as wide as saucers. So it turned out the “noble” young lady I had saved the day before was actually a princess. Talk about an unexpected twist!

The two of us stared at each other in complete silence, and naturally, it wasn’t long before the queen realized something was wrong. She turned to Shess with a frown on her face, and asked, “Is something the matter, Shessfelia? Do you two already know each—”

“No! No, no. I-I’ve never seen this man before, mother!” the little girl lied, interrupting her. “It’s just...” She tried desperately to come up with some excuse. “H-His hair! I was just thinking how unusual his hair color was!”

“Oh, really? Then, why do *you* look so surprised, Shiro?” she asked me.

“A-Ah, it’s just, um, I...” I trailed off, trying to come up with a lie of my own. “Ah! I was just thinking that Shess—uh, I mean, Princess Shessfelia is rather adorable! So much so, in fact, I can’t take my eyes off her!”

All in all, Shess and I had done a pretty good job of selling our respective lies, despite not agreeing on anything beforehand.

“My, my. Did you hear that, Shessfelia? Shiro just called you ‘adorable’! That is really nice, isn’t it?” the queen said to her daughter, sounding elated about the compliment.

“I-It is, mother. I am very honored,” Shess said, stiff as a stick.

“No, the honor is all mine, Princess Shessfelia,” I replied, just as awkwardly.



“Shessfelia, let me introduce you to Shiro. He will be providing you with your dress for the ball,” Queen Anielka informed her daughter.

“I-It’s an honor to meet you, Princess Shessfelia. My name is Shiro Amata.”

“A-And I am Zidan, guildmaster of the Eternal Promise merchant guild,” the owlman piped up.

Once we had introduced ourselves, we both stood up, placed a hand on our chests, and bowed respectfully to Shess. I had been told that this was the customary way to greet royalty in the Giruam

Kingdom, so I made sure to follow this tradition, even if I had technically already introduced myself to Shess the previous day.

“N-Nice to meet you. I am Shessfelia Shussel Giruam,” the little girl said shyly.

She was much, *much* better behaved than she had been the day before, likely because her mother was also in the room. Even the way she spoke sounded much more refined, which probably wasn’t so surprising because she was a princess after all, and it was only natural that she would have had to mind her language around her mother. It was just a bit of a shame she sounded like a spoiled brat the rest of the time.

As had been the case the previous day, Shess was accompanied by Luza, her escort, and the swordswoman glared at me. Even though she didn’t utter a word, her message was crystal clear: *Do not breathe a word about the events of yesterday*. I assumed Shess must have told her everything that had happened that day, including her getting attacked by thugs and me jumping in to save her, and it was fairly obvious that Luza did not want the queen learning about that. Well, that was kind of understandable. She was Shess’s personal guard, after all. If the queen learned that her precious daughter had been attacked under Luza’s watch, the poor swordswoman would undoubtedly lose her job. Or worse, possibly even her life. She couldn’t explicitly tell me to keep my mouth shut in front of the queen, so she had to resort to glowering at me with bloodshot eyes instead.

“I have personally asked Shiro to find a dress for you, Shessfelia,” the queen informed the little girl.

“I see,” Shess said demurely.

“Apparently, the last time he provided someone with a dress, it was so stunning even Lady Charlotte could find no fault with it. And that woman complains about *everything*! I am positive the dress he will pick out for you will be stunning. Isn’t that right, Shiro?” the queen asked me with a smile.

“Absolutely, Your Majesty! I will get in touch with all the dressmakers I know and ensure that the princess is furnished with a dress unlike any other,” I said.

“Did you hear that, Shessfelia?” the queen said. “Aren’t you excited?”

“Very much so,” the little girl mumbled unconvincingly after a pause.

Unlike her mother, she didn’t seem in the least bit enthusiastic about the dress. I couldn’t help wondering what had happened to all the energy she had displayed when she’d mercilessly kicked that thug in the crotch the day before.

“Shessfelia, are you against holding a ball? You turned eight

almost nine months ago. If we don't get it organized before your ninth birthday comes around, everyone will laugh at us!"

The little girl looked down at the floor and hesitated for a moment before murmuring, "I understand, mother. But I—"

We would never find out what it was she was about to say, because just at that moment, the door was flung open by someone who hadn't even bothered to knock first.

"Are you in here, dear sister? Ah, good, good. I've found you at last."

A noble lady in an extremely gaudy dress wafted into the room, followed by what seemed to be an army of servants and guards.

"Eleene..." the queen muttered, her brow knitted. Whoever this woman was, the queen clearly wasn't all that fond of her.

"I was wondering what you were doing in this dreary, empty room, dear sister," the woman said. She treated us all to a disdainful look before instructing one of her servants to give her a handkerchief, which she delicately brought up to her face while eyeing Zidan and me with disgust. "But it turns out you have been entertaining a birdman, of all people! May I remind you that you are the first queen consort? What if the people found out about this? The royal family would be the laughingstock of the kingdom!" the woman snarled indignantly, casting an accusatory glance toward the queen.

Beside me, Zidan instantly stiffened. He was clearly trying his hardest not to respond to the woman's derogatory diatribe.

"Your Majesty, may I inquire who this lady is?" I asked the queen, but before she could answer, the woman let out an outraged screech.

"Are you saying you do not know who I *am*?!" she seethed with a scornful look on her face.

"I apologize for my ignorance. I have only recently arrived in the capital," I explained calmly. "I live out near the border, you see."

"Near the *border*? Out in the middle of nowhere?" she said, looking even more disgusted by this. "So not only have you brought a birdman into the royal palace, but you have also invited this..."—she searched for the right word—"this *barbarian* in! This is unacceptable, dear sister!" the woman declared, disdain dripping from every word. "Prick up those ears, you uneducated country bumpkin. I am Eleene Esthed Huppert-Girum, Duke Huppert's daughter and the king's second wife!"

As soon as he heard this, Zidan hopped down from the sofa and kneeled in front of the woman, and I hurriedly did the same. The queen had been something of an exception, but in this world, whenever you were in the presence of royalty, you had to kneel before them.

The second queen consort chuckled self-importantly. "Under

normal circumstances, peasants like you would never be allowed in the same room as me. You had better thank the gods that you have been so fortunate today!"

"Eleene, could you please refrain from disrespecting my guests?" Queen Anielka said pointedly to the second queen consort. Her phrasing was polite, but her tone was firm, and from what I could tell, it seemed that even though the two of them were both wives of the king, the second queen consort had more authority than Queen Anielka did. I wondered why that was.

"Your *guests*? The birdman and the barbarian?" the second queen consort uttered, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. I am the one who invited them to the castle," Queen Anielka said matter-of-factly. "Zidan, Shiro, please retake your seats."

"Of course, Your Majesty," I said, and Zidan and I sat down on the sofa again.

The second queen consort was glaring daggers at us. "I can't believe you have invited these two *low-borns* into the royal palace. Do I need to remind you that you are the first queen consort, dear sister? Besides, what in the world could you need these people for?"

"I wish to commission them for a dress for Shessfelia," Queen Anielka replied simply.

On hearing this, the second queen consort stayed silent for several seconds before suddenly bursting into laughter, her arms clutching her midsection.

"Have you lost your mind, dear sister? You plan to ask a birdman and a country bumpkin to produce a dress for your daughter, the *princess*? How ridiculous! Poor Shessfelia!" She paused briefly before walking over to Shess. "Don't you agree, Shessfelia?" she asked in a sugary-sweet voice as she stroked the little girl's hair.

Shess instantly stiffened. There was no way the second queen consort could have missed the little girl's reaction, but she continued patting her head. "My, my, Shessfelia. What *has* happened to your hair? It's so messy! What was your attendant thinking when she tended to you today? This is unacceptable. No servant should let their mistress walk around looking so disheveled. Poor little Shessfelia. Don't you think so too?" the second queen consort said to the little girl.

But Shess stayed completely silent. She was resolutely staring down at the ground and I noticed that her little shoulders had started trembling.

"Eleene," Queen Anielka interjected, unable to watch the second queen consort torturing her daughter for a moment longer.

But unfortunately, the intervention wasn't enough to stop her. "Dear sister, if you have time to worry about ordering a dress for

Shessfelia, might I suggest that time would be better spent teaching her the art of proper hair care? She looks like a wild beast! It is most unbecoming of a member of our esteemed royal family.”

Shess silently brought her hands up to the beret she was wearing and pulled it down even tighter over her head, most likely in an attempt to hide her unruly hair.



“My, my. Is something the matter, Shessfelia? Oh, I know. You must have realized that you had forgotten to comb your hair this morning and now you are trying to hide it under that hat,” the second queen consort said.

“Eleene!” Queen Anielka repeated, louder this time. But it was too late. Shess was on the verge of tears.

“Oh, are you about to cry, Shessfelia?” the second queen consort said. “Are you ashamed of your hair? Take this as a lesson. From tomorrow onward, you will never again forget to comb your hair.”

“Eleene!” Queen Anielka said for the third time. She got up from her seat and went over to stand between Shess and the second queen consort.

“Whatever is the matter, dear sister? That scary expression on your face doesn’t suit you.”

“Shessfelia’s hair is naturally curly. Please do not torment her about it.”

“Oh, my! I completely forgot!” the second queen consort gasped, faking shock. “You are right, dear sister.” She paused and a cruel smile spread across her face. “Unlike yours or His Majesty’s, your daughter’s hair is like the mane of a wild beast!”

Queen Anielka bit her lip and Shess lowered her head so far, I couldn’t see her face anymore.

“I wonder why her hair turned out like that when both you and His Majesty have such beautiful, silky-smooth hair,” the second queen consort mused before addressing Shess again. “Your mother said you were born with it. Is that true?”

But the little girl didn’t say a word. She simply stood there and stared at the floor while enduring the second queen consort’s taunts. She was still gripping her hat tightly, almost as if she was afraid it was suddenly going to fly off her head.

“That reminds me. Have you heard that certain individuals have been questioning your loyalty to His Majesty, dear sister?” the second queen consort said to Queen Anielka. “Oh, *I* am not one of them, of course! I trust your good character, dear sister. After all, you would *never* betray the one you hold so dearly in your heart,” she said in a saccharine-sweet voice.

“Shessfelia’s eyes are a beautiful blue, just like His Majesty’s,” Queen Anielka said slowly. “That is proof that she is his child.”

“Oh, but dear sister, there are plenty of people with blue eyes in the royal palace!”

Queen Anielka’s legs were shaking by this point. She seemed absolutely terrified of the second queen consort. But despite the dread she was clearly feeling, she remained steadfastly inserted between

Eleene and Shess, protecting her daughter from this vile, vile woman. It was a sign of a mother's true love. All of a sudden, she reminded me a lot of Stella.

All righty. I'd made up my mind. I, Shiro Amata, would save Shess from the clutches of this cold-blooded, evil woman!

"Huh. So there are people who doubt Your Majesty's faithfulness just because Princess Shessfelia has curly hair?" I asked, feigning surprise.

A wicked smile spread across the second queen consort's face. It seemed she wasn't done with using Shess as her punching bag. "Yes, indeed! I have heard other nobles wondering aloud if she might perhaps have a *different* father, since her hair is so different from that of her parents. Of course, rumors of that ilk circulating about the royal family are completely unacceptable. I can't help feeling sorry for you, dear sister and Shessfelia. Don't you think, out-of-towner?"

"I wholeheartedly agree, Queen Eleene."

The second queen consort burst out laughing once more. "Oh, poor Shessfelia!"

All righty. Now for the counterattack.

"Yes, poor Shessfelia. Though I can't help feeling an even greater pity for the individual who first propagated such a baseless rumor," I said.

The second queen consort suddenly stopped laughing, but I paid her no attention and turned to Queen Anielka instead. "May I ask you something, Your Majesty?"

"Wh-What is it, Shiro?"

"I simply wondered if perhaps one of Princess Shessfelia's grandparents had similar hair to her," I said innocently.

"Now that you mention it, the previous king, King Azbaal, had very similar hair to Shessfelia's," Queen Anielka said after a little thought.

I hit the palm of my hand with my fist as if everything had suddenly just become clear. "Oh! Then her curly hair is proof that she is without doubt His Majesty's daughter."

Shess raised her head a little, though she continued to grip her hat tightly. She looked incredibly confused by what I was saying.

"And what do you mean by that, pray tell?" the second queen consort asked me.

Snickering internally, I raised a finger and began my lecture, "Oh, it is rather simple. Occasionally, children inherit characteristics from their grandparents rather than their parents. This phenomenon is known as 'atavism,' though most people simply refer to it as the characteristics in question 'skipping a generation.'"

"Is that so? So Princess Shessfelia inherited her hair from King

Azbaal, one of the Sixteen Heroes?" Zidan said, seemingly impressed.

Huh. So the previous king had been one of these "Sixteen Heroes" people occasionally brought up, had he? I made a mental note to ask Eldos about the old king the next time I saw him.

"Ever since I first laid eyes on her, I have been impressed by how refined Princess Shessfelia looks. Of course, it all makes sense now. She must also have inherited her looks from King Azbaal!" I said.

"Ooh, impressive!" Zidan marveled.

The second queen consort, on the other hand, seemed utterly confused. I could almost see the question mark floating above her head. "A-Atavism?" she muttered to herself, though unfortunately for her, I heard her say it.

I feigned a perplexed expression as I turned to her. "Atavism is a rather elementary concept where I'm from. You *do* know about it, don't you, Queen Eleene?"

"O-Of course I do!" she said hurriedly.

People as prideful as her really hated it when others knew things they didn't, *especially* when that knowledgeable person was someone they looked down on. It was obvious she had absolutely no idea what I was talking about, but she claimed she did all the same. *She reminds me of my former boss.*

"Well, of course. You are the second queen consort, after all. You must be extremely knowledgeable in all manner of things," I said, laying it on thick.

"N-Naturally. Ata..." She stumbled over the word. "Atavism. Right. Yes, of course I know what it is. I know all about it."

"And anyone who understands that concept would never suspect Queen Anielka of being unfaithful to His Majesty the King. That is why it must have been some uneducated fool spreading those rumors about Princess Shessfelia not being the king's daughter. I pity them in a way, to be quite honest with you. Uneducated people often tend to resort to spreading rumors, you see. Being that ignorant must be quite difficult," I said, punctuating my sentence with a sigh.

This time, it was the second queen consort who was trembling from head to toe. The vein on her forehead was pulsating so fast, I was a little scared it might explode at any moment. She had pretended to have nothing to do with the rumors about Shess, so I'd used that to my advantage, agreeing with her every word and calling the people who had dared to spread the malicious rumors (and let's be real here: it was definitely the second queen consort herself who started them) ignorant as well as pouring scorn on them. But she couldn't say anything to the contrary, because doing so would have basically been an admission that she had been the one who had started the rumors in the first place. As I watched her tremble with anger, her cheeks

twitching due to how mad she was, my eyes ended up meeting Shess's. The little girl still hadn't opened her mouth, but she was staring at me wide-eyed. Taking care not to be noticed by either Queen Anielka or the second queen consort, I playfully flashed Shess a peace sign and a wink, as if to silently say to her: *I just gave her a taste of her own medicine*. True to form, Shess huffily turned her head away, but I could tell she was a lot less distressed than before. It looked like I had managed to lift her spirits a little.

"I do not care for any rumors that are being spread around the castle, Eleene," Queen Anielka stated. "Did you intrude on my meeting with these gentlemen just to talk to me about that piffling nonsense?"

Queen Anielka's words seemed to bring the second queen consort back to reality. *Aw, that's a shame. I wanted to watch her quiver with rage for a bit longer.*

"Of course not, dear sister," the second queen consort replied. "I heard you had started on the preparations for Shessfelia's ball, and I wanted to converse with you on the matter."

"What did you want to talk about exactly?" Queen Anielka asked, her eyebrow raised in suspicion.

The second queen consort giggled. "I wish to hold a joint ball for Shessfelia and my little Patricia."

A strangled noise got caught in Queen Anielka's throat and she went white as a sheet.

"You see, Patricia turned eight last month, and though they may have different mothers, she and Shessfelia are still sisters. There is nothing that would bring Patricia greater joy than to have her debut ball coincide with her beloved older sister's!"

O-kay, let's try unpacking that. The second queen consort had suggested throwing a joint ball to celebrate both Shessfelia and her own daughter, Patricia, turning eight, which would mean the two of them would make their society debut at the same time. However, a quick glance at Queen Anielka's face told me she was very much against this idea.

"Couldn't Patricia have her debut ball on another day?" she suggested.

"Oh, but dear sister, you must factor in that balls are lavish affairs, and the funds for such grand events come directly out of the national purse. This is undoubtedly an important event, but the money for it comes from the taxes our people work hard to pay. I am positive our people would wholeheartedly appreciate us consolidating the celebrations into one grand ball, rather than holding two."

Oh, snap. That was a pretty solid argument. There was no way Queen Anielka would be able to argue against it.

"Plus, the merchant I have commissioned to procure a dress for

Patricia has just arrived and I really want you to meet him!" the second queen consort said excitedly, before turning to one of her servants. "Please bring Bart here, will you?"

She clapped twice, and a few seconds later, the door slowly swung open.

Hold on. Bart? That name sounds familiar for some reason...

The man in question entered the room, and as soon as my eyes landed on him, I recalled where I'd last heard the name.

"It is an honor to meet you, Queen Anielka. I am the guildmaster of the Ruby and Jade merchant guild. My name is Bart Furst. I extend my heartfelt greetings to you," the man said, introducing himself before bowing deeply.

I was frozen in shock, and I noted that Zidan was in a similar state of paralysis on seeing the man. Why, you might ask? Well...

"Oh, Mr. Shiro!" the man exclaimed. "Well, well. It has been quite a while since our last encounter. Fancy seeing you here."

Yup, this Mr. Bart was none other than the jerk who'd tipped water over me a couple of months back in Mazela.

Chapter Ten: Bart, the Merchant Who Rose from the Ashes

A little while back, Zidan had told me that the merchant guild run by Bart, the Ruby and Jade, had been forced to close down after getting into financial trouble, and consequently, Bart had left Mazela. The man himself, however, was in the middle of relating a wholly different tale to us.

“Mazela was getting a little too cramped for our guild, you see,” he said. “I’d been considering making the move to the capital for a while, and I figured it was about time I took the plunge.”

He was making it sound like he’d left Mazela entirely of his own volition when that couldn’t have been further from the truth. I was floored by the sheer mendacity of it. He then began telling us about his “success story” even though no one had asked, recounting all the ups and downs his guild had experienced, the truth greatly embellished. Zidan and I weren’t impressed, and judging by the frown on her face, it seemed Queen Anielka wasn’t either. The second queen consort, Queen Eleene, on the other hand, was drinking in his every word, nodding along and occasionally bringing a hand up to her face to wipe the outer corner of her eyes as if moved to tears, though I didn’t see a single one fall.

“But then, fate finally smiled on me again in the form of Queen Eleene appointing me as the royal purveyor. Even in my wildest dreams, I never imagined I would one day supply products to Queen Eleene herself,” Bart said smarmily.

To sum up his story the way he saw it, here’s what happened: after finding himself in self-exile from Mazela, Bart headed to the royal capital to kick-start his business once more, and was swiftly appointed as royal purveyor by the second queen consort. He also claimed his guild was doing better than ever, and that his customer base largely consisted of high-ranking nobles.

“All of Bart’s wares are simply *exquisite!*” the second queen consort preened, chuckling away.

“You are much too kind, Your Majesty,” Bart said, bowing politely.

The second queen consort turned to Queen Anielka. “If I might make a suggestion, dear sister: why not ask Bart to source a dress for Shessfelia too? He would certainly do a much better job of it than this

birdman and this out-of-towner here.”

“I am positive I can find the perfect dress for Princess Shessfelia, Your Majesty,” Bart affirmed, rubbing his hands together.

But Queen Anielka shook her head. “That will not be necessary, thank you. I have already asked Shiro for his assistance.”

“Oh, what a shame. But if that is your wish, dear sister, I suppose there is nothing more to be said on the matter,” Queen Eleene remarked before turning her head toward Bart and exchanging a nod with him. “Well then, Bart. I am counting on you to find the most beautiful dress for my little Patricia!”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he replied. “I assure you that the dress I procure for the princess will be nothing short of magnificent. I stake my guild’s reputation on it.”

“I am counting on you,” the second queen consort repeated before exiting the room.

Once she had left, Bart turned to me with a fake smile on his face. “Mr. Shiro, you and I may have had our differences in the past, but at the end of the day, we are both merchants. Let’s let bygones be bygones and focus on finding dresses for the princesses, shall we?”

He extended a hand toward me, and even though I hesitated for a moment, I knew declining the handshake would only add to the awkwardness of the situation, so I reluctantly shook it.

“I am very much looking forward to the ball,” he said, his insincere smile widening.

Seeing that forced smile, I couldn’t help feeling he was up to no good.



Queen Anielka’s father was a baron, which was one of the lowest ranks of nobility. Queen Eleene’s father, on the other hand, wasn’t just a duke, but also a member of a cadet branch of the royal family.

“So that’s why the second queen consort acts all high and mighty and feels she can make all of those snide remarks to Queen Anielka. Her family is more powerful,” I said.

Zidan nodded. “Yup. Queen Eleene was originally supposed to be the king’s only wife, and the two of them even got engaged while he was still a bachelor. But when the king met Queen Anielka, he fell head over heels in love with her, and despite the protests of everyone around him, he went ahead and married her. Queen Eleene’s family *insisted* that he honor the prior engagement, however, which is how she became the second queen consort,” Zidan explained, summing it all up for me.

“Oh, so that’s what happened,” I mused. “But how come you know all this?”

“A merchant friend of mine who lives in the royal capital told me about it. It’s common knowledge here, apparently.”

The two of us were presently taking a carriage back to the inn and chitchatting about the royal family. Queen Anielka had provided us with the carriage, and it was a fairly pleasant ride overall.

“Oh, by the way...” Zidan started, seemingly remembering something. “I have something to tell you about him. About Bart, I mean.” He suddenly looked dead serious.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Okay, you listening?” he said, before lowering his voice. “Remember how I told you he had stopped trading in Mazela?”

“Yeah. You said that after Lord Bashure’s ball, the countess stopped shopping at his guild and he lost all of the privileges he had, or something like that.”

“Yup, that’s right. After that, the Ruby and Jade lost their spot as the most profitable guild in the feudal capital and ended up getting a pretty bad reputation.”

“Wow. Who would have thought the Ruby and Jade guild would suffer such a fall from grace? I almost can’t believe it,” I remarked, recalling how massive their headquarters had been and how busy it had seemed when I went there, with tons of people streaming in and out of the building.

“All of the merchants in Mazela know about what happened,” Zidan said.

“Well, Lord Bashure did call out Bart’s behavior publicly at the banquet, so I guess it’s not a total surprise that the nobles and other merchants in attendance spread the word. Can’t say I feel bad for him, though. You reap what you sow, as they say. He shouldn’t have poured water over me when we first met. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t his first victim either,” I reflected.

A couple of months back, at a banquet thrown by the earl of the region, Lord Bashure, I had gotten into a bit of an argument with Bart about the selling rights of the shampoo sets I had started selling in the capital. This contretemps hadn’t gone unnoticed by Lord Bashure himself, who had been less than pleased with Bart’s attitude, and as a result, the Ruby and Jade—which had, up until that point, been the top merchant guild in Mazela for many years—had suffered a damaging blow to their reputation. And once people learned of Bart’s negotiating tactics, which consisted largely of threatening potential trading partners and coercing them into agreeing to unreasonable demands, they’d all stopped dealing with the Ruby and Jade period. It was a monumental fall from grace, which in turn allowed Zidan’s guild, the Eternal Promise, to grow and gain in popularity, effectively filling the sizable gap the out-of-favor guild had left behind. Every

flow has its ebb, pride comes before a fall, and all that jazz.

With the reputation of his guild in tatters, Bart had scampered away to the capital, moving the headquarters of the Ruby and Jade guild there as a last resort. This didn't surprise me all that much, because it was the kind of tale you often heard about on TV and such. Of course, I'd naively assumed that after moving to the royal capital, Bart would have stopped doing all that shady stuff, cleared his name, and successfully rebuilt his business from the ground up, but according to Zidan, that wasn't the case *at all*.

"Listen, I don't want to say this too loudly, because you never know who might be listening, but I've heard that Bart deals with some *real* shady underground guilds," Zidan whispered to me.

In this world, "underground guilds" was basically code for organized crime groups, much like the mafia back on Earth, as an example. And now that he had teamed up with them, Bart was pretty much free to do whatever he wanted in the royal capital. Not only that, but he had also managed to gain the favor of the second queen consort—most likely through flattery—which meant he had allies on both sides of the law and was pretty much untouchable. Even the town guards probably wouldn't be able to say anything to him about his conduct.

"I actually sent you ten letters," Zidan confessed.

"Ten? I only got one."

"I thought as much. They must have been intercepted. I'm glad at least one found its way to you."

It seemed Zidan had attempted to send me a letter no less than ten times, changing the contents and delivery method and so on each time, but they had all been intercepted by Bart and his goons, save for the one where he hadn't explicitly stated that he needed my help. That clearly showed just how much power Bart wielded in the royal capital.

But hold on a minute. If Bart had indeed intercepted those letters, that meant he must have known all along that Queen Anielka wished to commission the Eternal Promise to find a dress for Shess. He must have then taken those letters to the second queen consort and offered to help ruin Queen Anielka's plans, which meant he had also known in advance of our meeting just now that the second queen consort was planning to merge the debutante balls of the two princesses. That suggested he had been scheming with the second queen consort for a while.

"He's become a really powerful figure, but we should be safe for the time being. We are guests invited to the capital by the queen, after all, so even he wouldn't be able to lay a hand on us and get away with it," Zidan said. "Still, take care out there, yeah? Those underground guilds are no joke."

“Noted,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll be fine, though. I have a bunch of reliable traveling companions who will keep me safe.”

I was talking specifically about Patty, Celes, and Dramom. The three of them were strong enough to easily take on any underground guild that might come for me without even breaking a sweat. They were way, *way* more powerful than anything Bart could throw at me. So in short, all I had to do was focus on one thing: completing my task of finding a dress for Shess.

Chapter Eleven: Where'd the Princess Go?

The next day, I went back to the royal palace, but this time, I took Aina with me. Queen Anielka had given me the assignment of procuring a dress for Shess, and the first order of business was to take the little girl's measurements, which was something I definitely couldn't do myself. That was why I had decided to ask Aina to perform the task for me. I had of course asked Queen Anielka for permission to return with my helper for this purpose, and the guards immediately let us into the castle when we arrived. At first, Aina had been really excited about the idea of visiting the castle, but when I told her Shess's true identity, her smile vanished.

"Shess is the *princess of the kingdom*?!" she repeated, eyes as wide as saucers.

"I know. I couldn't believe it at first either," I said. "Shess seemed pretty shocked to see me in the royal palace yesterday too."

"So that means I'm gonna have to call her Princess Shess from now on, doesn't it?" the little girl muttered, looking a bit down.

Two days before, the two of them had seemingly gotten along pretty well while we were having lunch, and Aina must have believed they could become good friends if they were ever to see each other again. Unfortunately, princesses weren't in the habit of making friends with commoners, and Aina was smart enough to understand that immediately, which is why she looked so down following this revelation.

"You took your sweet time, merchant. This way. Follow me," said Shess's escort, Luza, when we walked in through the gate. We followed her to the room where Shess was waiting for us.

"Princess! Amata the merchant is here with his assistant," she announced after knocking at the door.

A few seconds passed before a maid—who was most likely Shess's attendant—opened the door. "Come in, Miss Luza," she said.

But as soon as we crossed the threshold, we were met with the sight of Shess stomping her feet and pouting.

"What are you *doing* here, Amata? I didn't summon you! Get out!"



“I don’t want a dress! I don’t want one!”

I’d come all the way to the royal palace to take Shess’s measurements, but the little girl was absolutely adamant that she wasn’t going to have a dress made for her.

“But, Princess, you won’t be able to attend your ball if you don’t have a—” Luza tried reasoning with her.

But Shess shook her head resolutely and interrupted her. “No, I don’t want a dress! And I don’t want to go to any ball either!”

Luza wasn’t about to give up that easily, though. “Please, Princess. If you don’t let Amata find you a dress, Her Majesty will be very disappointed.”

Shess’s expression immediately changed. It seemed Luza knew Shess’s weaknesses pretty well, but then again, she *was* her personal bodyguard, so that kind of made sense.

Shess continued to argue with Luza for a bit longer, but she eventually muttered, “Fine. I’m going to get ready, so get out while I do.”

She had agreed—albeit, very reluctantly—to let us take her measurements at last.

“Understood, Princess,” Luza said before turning to me and Aina. “Well, you heard the princess, Amata. Leave the room. That goes for your little assistant too.”

“And you too, Luza,” Shess said.

The swordswoman’s jaw dropped to the floor. “M-Me too?”

“Well, yeah! You *are* my knight, yes?”

“Of course! My sword is pledged to you, Princess,” Luza said, instantly straightening up.

“Then, as your mistress, I order you to make sure Amata doesn’t try to spy on me while I’m changing!” Shess declared.

A gasp escaped from Luza’s mouth. “Understood, Princess! If that is your order, I shall obey! Now, get out, Amata! Hurry it up!”

Aina and I were shooed out of the room by Luza. Once outside, she turned to us and said, “Listen up! You’d better not set foot inside that room until the princess tells you she’s ready to receive you. Well, not that you could even if you wanted to, because I won’t let you anywhere near that door!” She rounded off her sentence with a self-satisfied laugh. She seemed in pretty high spirits and I wondered if that had anything to do with Shess addressing her as “her knight.”

Left with no other option, Aina and I waited out in the hallway for Shess to let us back into the room. We waited. And waited. And waited.

“Um, Luza?” I said eventually.

“What do you want?” she retorted.

“Are we still not allowed in?”

“O-Of course not! The princess hasn’t called for you yet.”

“I know that, but, uh, it’s been quite a while, don’t you think?”

Luza paused. “You have a point. Hold on a minute.” She turned toward the door. “Princess? Are you going to be much longer?” she called through it. “Princess?” she tried again when there was no response.

We waited some more, but no answer was forthcoming.

“Uh, Princess? Can you hear me in there? It’s Luza!” she called, a little louder this time.

But no matter how many times she tried to get a response from Shess, the little girl didn’t answer.

A look of concern flickered across Luza’s face. “Princess? Are you in there? P-Princess? If you’re in there, please answer!” she cried, pounding on the door. She looked on the verge of tears. “I-I’m opening the door now. I’m opening the door, all right? Please don’t yell at me when I do! If my pay gets cut any more, I won’t be able to afford food! So please don’t be angry at me for opening this door!”

She brought her hand up to the doorknob as droplets of sweat streamed down her face and took a deep breath before flinging the door wide. We were immediately confronted by the sight of Shess’s maid tied up and with a gag in her mouth, muffling her insistent pleading.

“You! Where did the princess go?!” Luza barked at her as she quickly untied the restraints.

“She tied me up and escaped out the window,” the freed maid explained in between sobs. “I can’t do this job anymore!”

We all looked across at the window and saw that it was wide open. An adult would have struggled to squeeze out through it, but for a little girl of Shess’s size, it posed no challenge at all.

“Princess...” Luza stared at the open window in disbelief. “Sh-She’s run away *again*...” she lamented, before slumping to the ground in shock.



“My lady must be around here somewhere,” Luza asserted as we scoured the slums for Shess.

We were fairly close to where I’d first met her two days prior. According to Luza, this was where Shess liked to come whenever she ran away. *Good grief. Why would a princess of all people want to hang around the slums?*

“Could you help me look for the pri—I mean, for my lady?” Luza had asked us, looking a bit apologetic.

I’d noticed that while Luza called Shess “Princess” when they were in the palace, she always referred to her as “my lady” whenever they

were out in the city itself, probably so she wouldn't draw too much unwanted attention and to avoid giving ne'er-do-wells the idea of kidnapping Shess. Though they should probably have thought about dressing her in outfits that didn't scream "My family has money!" if they didn't want a repeat of what had happened a few days ago.

"Pri—um, my ladyyy! Where are youuu?" Luza yelled at the top of her lungs.

I joined in. "Sheeess! Hey, Sheeess!"

"Merchant! Show some respect to the princess, will you? Don't call her by her name without using some sort of title!" Luza huffed, glaring at me.

"I can't?" I asked innocently.

"Of course not!"

"What about me?" Aina piped up.

"No, you can't either!"

After about thirty minutes of looking for Shess, Aina suddenly shouted, "Look, Mister Shiro!"

"Huh? Look where?" I replied.

"There!" the little girl urged, pointing to an alleyway.

I did as instructed and spotted a little girl wearing a bright blue dress that was much too extravagant for any slum-dweller to be wearing. She was tucked away in one corner of the alleyway and I could only see her back from here, but there was no doubting that it was Shess.

"Thank goodness we've finally found her," I sighed with relief.

"Hey, She—"

"Hold it!"

"Mmph!"

I was just about to call out to her when Luza slapped a hand over my mouth. I tried to protest with my eyes, but Luza didn't even spare me a single glance, her gaze firmly fixed on Shess.

"Please wait. Just for a few minutes," she said as she released me.

"I don't mind, but are you sure?" I asked. "Shouldn't you grab her before we lose her again? You *are* her escort, after all."

"Just for a few minutes," she repeated. "She's in the middle of something important."

Aina and I were so confused by this, you could practically see the question marks dancing above our heads.

After a couple of minutes, the sound of Shess's voice drifted across to us. "Oh, you're finally all here. I can't believe you made me wait so long!"

It seemed as though she wasn't alone. Aina and I exchanged confused glances and pricked up our ears.

"You'd all better thank me for this. I went out of my way to bring

you commoners this yummy food,” Shess said.

“Yes, thank you, miss!”

“Hurry, hurry, miss!”

“I’m so hungry.”

“I haven’t eaten in three days!”

Judging from the voices, she was talking to other children, though they sounded much, much younger than Shess and Aina. I strained my eyes to try to make out the children, which wasn’t easy because Shess was standing directly in front of them with her hands on her hips, but I managed to catch sight of a few of them. There were dogboys and doggirls, cat-siths, dwarves, lizardboys and lizardgirls, and even a few kids who looked like they had six limbs. There were all kinds of races represented there, to the point where pretty much the only thing they had in common was that none of them were humes.

“Here you go. I brought you lots of food this time, so share it out among yourselves, you hear?” Shess said, opening up a large leather bag and dishing out the contents to the children. She handed out fresh fruit, cooked dishes, desserts, and so on and so forth. They were all clearly leftovers, but the children didn’t seem bothered by that at all.

“Thanks for always giving us food, miss,” one of the children piped up.

“Thish ish sho yummy!” another kid said with a mouthful of food.

“I’ve never eaten anything this yummy before!” exclaimed a third.

All the kids were very happy, and I saw that some were even crying. I could tell by their reactions that they all really liked Shess.

“My lady often comes down to the slums to distribute food to the non-hume orphans here,” Luza told me, and she looked incredibly proud of her charge.

The non-hume orphans, huh? I had been taken aback when we’d first set foot in this area due to how dilapidated it was compared to the rest of the royal capital, but it seemed this district’s population constituted mostly of nonhumans. In fact, this poverty-stricken district appeared to be the place where nearly all of the nonhumans in the capital lived. As I understood it, Shess would occasionally slip out of the castle with food she had swiped from the palace’s kitchen to give to the children here, and even though she’d been attacked by thugs only two days earlier, that hadn’t deterred her from making the trip again.

“So Shess—um, I mean, Princess Shess is actually a really nice person who cares a whole lot about her people, huh?” I said. “But why’s she coming here by herself? Surely she could just send a couple of servants or soldiers to the slums to distribute this food, no?” I asked.

A wistful look flashed across Luza’s face. “No one ever listens to

her up at the royal palace,” she said.

“But she’s the *princess*,” I remarked in some surprise.

“Yeah...” Luza said despondently. “She’s the first princess of the kingdom, and yet, her only ally is Her Majesty, Queen Anielka. His Majesty loves Shess too, of course, but he has to take Queen Eleene’s viewpoint into account as well, which means he can’t really be seen to side with the princess.”

According to Luza, this was all due to the different factions in the royal palace. Unfortunately, because Queen Anielka was the daughter of a baron, it meant fewer people sided with her than with Queen Eleene, whose father was a duke, and the king had to always bear this in mind and couldn’t simply ignore Queen Eleene’s wishes.

“And besides, the children the princess is distributing this food to are non-humes. No one would willingly go out of their way to help them, even if they did listen to the princess’s orders.”

“I see. I think I have a good handle on the situation now.” So that explained why Shess regularly came to the slums all by herself.

“Did you all get some? I have to go now, but I’ll be back again, so that gives you something to look forward to, doesn’t it?” Shess said to the children once she’d finished distributing the food.

She spun on her heels and ended up face-to-face with us. A surprised little squeak escaped her lips when she noticed Aina and me, and she suddenly looked very embarrassed.

“W-Were you watching?” she asked us.

“Yes, we were. Weren’t we, Aina?”

“Y-Yeah,” the little girl said, nodding.

A frown instantly appeared on Shess’s face. It seemed she wasn’t happy at all that we’d witnessed this side of her, but I couldn’t understand why. I mean, a princess feeding the orphans? It sounded like the kind of story minstrels loved to sing about.

“Shall we head home now, my lady?” Luza asked Shess.

The little girl nodded, though she still had a sour look on her face. “Fine.”

And with that, the four of us headed back to the royal palace, having successfully retrieved Shess.

Chapter Twelve: Terms of the Deal

Having now found Shess, the four of us headed back to the royal palace. *We can finally take her measurements*, I celebrated internally, but as it turned out, I'd started rejoicing too soon.

"What is it you don't understand about the words, 'I don't want a dress'?" Shess protested, still unwilling to cooperate with us.

"But, princess, without a dress, you won't be able to attend your ball—" Luza started, trying to reason with her, but the little girl interrupted.

"I don't want to go to any ball either! Besides, Patricia will be there, right? So they can just carry on without me," Shess harrumphed.

"Princess, please try to consider Her Majesty's feelings..." Luza implored the little girl.

Shess fell silent, seemingly unable to respond to that.

"His Majesty is also looking forward to you making your society debut," Luza insisted.

"I told you I don't want to!" Shess yelled petulantly.

To our dismay, Luza's efforts weren't bearing fruit, and I had to admit, I was starting to get a bit worried. After all, how was I supposed to get my job done if Shess continued to point-blank refuse to allow me to take her measurements?

"Um, Shess—I mean, *Princess* Shess—could you please let me take your measurements? I promise it won't take long," Aina said timidly, her head bowed deeply out of respect.

"Princess Shess?" Shess repeated, a frown appearing on her face.

Aina nodded. "Y-Yes. You're a princess, so..."

Tears started to well up in Shess's eyes and she bit her lip, looking equal parts sad and frustrated. The second I saw her little face scrunch up, it all clicked into place. I understood everything: the reason Aina calling her "princess" made her sad, her regular absconding from the palace, why she had been so scared of the second queen consort, and why she was so dead set on not going to this ball, despite it being her duty to attend. *So that's how it is.*

It all stemmed from one thing: Shess hated being part of the royal family. I would even have gone as far as to suggest that she probably considered her status as a princess a curse and a heavy burden. This also likely explained why she had been so compliant when Aina had

scolded her, and why her face had gone all red when Celes complimented her. And not only that but her regular expeditions to the slums to feed those poor orphaned children also made sense to me now. *Yup. Everything's become crystal clear.*

I now knew exactly how to handle her, because I'd figured out what it was she wanted from the people around her.

"Princess..." Luza said, seemingly confused as to why Shess was on the verge of tears.

Aina was similarly confused as she breathed a quiet, "Princess Shess?"

I walked past the pair of them, balled up my right hand, and gently dropped it onto Shess's head. Very, very gently.

"C'mon now. Just because you're a princess, that doesn't mean you can throw a tantrum when things don't go how you want them to," I gently scolded the little girl.

"Huh?" Shess gasped, completely taken aback by my actions. She brought a hand up to her head, almost as if trying to confirm what had just happened. A look of understanding flickered across her face before protestations poured from her mouth. "Wh-Wh-What in the world do you think you're *doing*?!"

"Hm? Oh, I just bonked you on the head," I replied nonchalantly.

"Do you know who I *am*?!" she shrieked.

"Of course I do." I paused and let a few seconds of expectant silence pass before continuing. "You're a spoiled, selfish little girl. Aren't you?"

Shess's jaw dropped open in disbelief. Yep, I was sure of it now. Shess was starving for love. Not romantic love, of course, but the parental kind. Affection, in other words. That explained why she had listened obediently to Aina when she had been scolded for wasting food at the restaurant. After all, you wouldn't usually try to make someone a better person by scolding them and getting mad at their obnoxious behavior unless you cared about them in some way, and she had responded to that. All along, Shess had only truly wanted one thing: a friend.

"Everyone in this room is working hard for your sake. We're all trying to help you. Not just Aina and I, but Luza too, who wants nothing more than to keep you safe."

Shess didn't say anything, so I continued.

"Yet here you are, ignoring all of our efforts and acting like a spoiled brat. Well, you listen to me. I have no qualms with bonking you on the head as many times as it takes to get you to act appropriately. I don't want to do it, but if you're going to carry on behaving that way, I have no choice."

"Do you really believe you can lay a hand on *me* and get away

with it?" the little girl huffed, glaring at me, though I could see there was no genuine anger or bitterness in her eyes.

"I guess the punishment for bonking a princess on the head is probably something along the lines of being sent to the gallows, right?" I said matter-of-factly.

"I-If you knew *that*, then why did you whack me?!" the little girl asked hurriedly. It seemed as though the word "gallows" had made her panic slightly. She was acting tough, but it was obvious she was genuinely worried what might happen to me if people were to learn that I'd laid a hand on the kingdom's first princess.

"As an adult, it's my duty to let you know when you're being unreasonable and to teach you right from wrong. Ah, but I guess I don't really want to die yet."

"I-I'll forgive you if you apologize right now!" Shess said quickly.

"But if I apologize for it, then there wasn't much point in me scolding you in the first place, was there? I have a better idea. Listen, how would you like to make a deal with me?" I suggested to the little girl.

"A deal?" she echoed, her eyes widening with curiosity.

"Yes. I *am* a merchant, after all."

"What..." she started hesitantly. "What kind of deal?"

I chuckled self-importantly. "Well..." I trailed off as an enigmatic smile formed on my lips.

"Wh-What is it? Tell me right this instant!" Shess urged, losing her patience.

Unable to contain my amusement at her reaction, I chuckled softly. "Sorry, sorry. It's really not as dramatic as I'm making it sound. Okay, so if you agree to let me provide you with a dress and you attend your debutante ball wearing it, I will *personally* ensure those orphaned children in the non-hume district—those kids you went to see earlier—are well looked after."

"Wha—" Once more, Shess's eyes grew wide with surprise, almost to the point where they were bulging out of their sockets. "A-Are you serious?"

"Completely serious. Let me break it down for you. If you have a successful debutante ball wearing the dress I procured for you, the royal family will let the merchant guild I'm registered with open up a branch here in the royal capital," I explained to Shess.

"What's that got to do with the children?" she asked, puzzled.

"It has everything to do with them. Think about it. When you open up a shop, you need people to work in it, right? Well, what if I make a promise to you that I will hire those kids to work for us?"

Shess didn't say a word in response, but her eyes grew even wider, if that was actually possible.

“Oh, but their salary will be based on how hard they work, okay? But don’t worry. I’ll still provide them with food and a place to bed down. They won’t ever go hungry again, and they’ll have somewhere warm to sleep.”

“I don’t believe you,” Shess said, throwing me an accusatory glare. “What proof do I have that you won’t just break your promise?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Aina beat me to the punch. “He won’t!”

“Aina...” Shess breathed in surprise.

“Mister Shiro saved me. So I’m sure...” She paused as her breathing became a little erratic. “I’m sure he will help these children too! I promise you he will!”

I gently placed a hand on her shoulder and said, “No, Aina. You’ve got it all wrong.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not the one who’s going to be helping those children.”

“What?” Aina asked me, utterly confused by this assertion.

“Shess is.”

“Huh?!” Shess spluttered, unable to hide her surprise as she gawked at me. I wasn’t sure if it was because of what I’d just said, or the fact that I’d called her by her name without adding her title before it.

“What do you think, Shess?” I asked the little girl.

She frowned. “You dare to address me without my title?”

“Ah, I already bonked you on the head, so I figure what’s one more offense, huh?” I said, grinning at her. “But if you really want me to, I can call you ‘Princess Shess,’ or ‘Your Highness,’ or even ‘little Shess’ if you’d prefer.”

The little girl humphed. “I’m giving you *special* permission to call me ‘Shess.’ You’d better be thankful that I’m so generous!”

“Thanks. Well then. What do you think of my offer, O generous Shess?” I teased.

The little girl balled her small hands up into fists, almost as if she’d just discovered her resolve. “It’s a promise, okay? If I go to this ball, you’ll look after the children,” she said.

“Yes, I promise. Not only does the guildmaster of my guild love helping out unfortunate children, he’s also really good at what he does,” I assured her with a smile.

Shess humphed again and flicked her head to the side in her usual manner, though a moment or two later, she turned to Aina and said, “Well, what are you waiting for, Aina? Come over here and take my measurements!”

“Huh? O-Oh, right!”

And so, after an inordinate amount of time had passed and all

those obstacles had been dealt with, Aina and I finally came away with Shess's measurements.

Chapter Thirteen: To the Cosplay Store!

Once Aina and I were all done up at the royal palace, we made our way back to the Thunderbird's Roost inn, where I informed the rest of my companions that I needed to "pay a visit to a dressmaker friend of mine" before secretly stepping through the portal back to grandma's house. I'd told my companions that it would probably take me a couple of days, so that gave me more than enough time to pick out a dress for Shess. I slid open the closet door and was greeted by the sight of Shiori and grandma eating dinner at the low table.

"Oh, welcome back, bro-bro!" Shiori said cheerily.

"Welcome back, Shiro. Have you had dinner already?" grandma asked me.

I closed the closet door and announced, "I'm home! Though I'll be leaving again soon enough."

I glanced at the table. That evening's meal for grandma and Shiori was a meat and potato stew, rice, and some hearty miso soup with plenty of vegetables in it. The mere sight of a proper Japanese dinner made my stomach growl, even though I'd already eaten dinner with Aina and the others at the inn. There was just something so comforting about a nice Japanese-style meal, you know?

"Want some?" grandma asked me, likely noticing the longing in my eyes.

"Well, if you're offering..."

"Sure. I'll get you a plate."

I made sure to eat my fill of the earthenware pot-cooked rice that I was having for the first time in a long time.





“Oh, by the way, where’s Saori?” I asked between mouthfuls of the ice cream that we’d decided to have after we’d finished our main course.

“She’s got club activities at school,” Shiori replied. “She said she was going to have dinner with her teammates and come to grandma’s tomorrow.”

Shiori and Saori went to the same high school, so they pretty much knew each other’s schedules inside out.

“Oh, that’s excellent news,” I said.

Shiori shot me a dirty look for responding in this way. “Bro-bro, you’re such a meanie. Poor Saorin.”

“No, you don’t understand. I need grandma’s help with something really important, but I wouldn’t be able to ask her about it if Saori were here.”

“My, my. You need *my* help?” grandma asked.

“I do! So basically...”

I recounted the events of the past few days to grandma and Shiori: how Zidan had asked me to come join him in the royal capital, how we’d met the queen, who had asked me to procure a dress for her daughter, how much of an insufferable brat Shess was, and so on and so forth. I didn’t stop babbling for a single second, and by the time I was done, I noticed that grandma had laid out some tea and sweets on the table for us.

“Anyway, that’s why I’m back here. I need to go and look for a dress for Shess,” I summed up.

“Wow, you have to find a dress for the *princess*! You’re seriously amazing, bro-bro!” Shiori marveled.

“My, now that *is* impressive,” grandma said, a tender smile on her face.

“I didn’t really want Saori here when I told you all that because, well...” I paused as I tried to figure out the best way to word my concern. “Well, you know what her fashion sense is like, don’t you? I couldn’t possibly ask for your advice about a dress with her in the room.”

The image of Celes made up like a wrestling villain courtesy of Saori was still fresh in my mind. It must have left a lasting impression on Shiori too, because she nodded gravely.

“So anyway, could the two of you please help me to find a dress for Shess?” I said to my sister and grandma.

“Of course!” Shiori replied.

“Thank you, Shiori-chan.”

“Guess your grandma’s going to have to help you out again, huh?” grandma said with a smile. “All right, then.”

“Thanks, grandma. I’ll get you a coupon for a shoulder massage as a thank-you gift, okay?”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not old enough to need one of *those*,” grandma scoffed.

“Uh, that’s a joke, right? Like, a grandma joke? Or is it a witch joke?” I pondered.

“Grandma, you’re, like, super-*duper* old, right? I mean, you *are* called the ‘Immortal Witch’ after all,” Shiori chimed in.

“That’s right, Shiori-chan. Our grandma is legendary in Ruffaltio. No one knows her real age!”

“Shiro, I seem to remember teaching you never to ask a lady her age,” grandma scowled at me.

“Well, I hope it isn’t in the four digits, at least. That’d make me feel *real* awkward, being your grandson and all.”

“Bro-bro, maybe it’s in the *five* digits!” Shiori said, chuckling mischievously.

“Oh, I guess that’s possible, isn’t it? Grandma kinda is fantasy personified, after all,” I mused.

“I know, right?” my sister agreed.

“You two are so mean to your poor grandmother,” grandma huffed. “I take it you don’t need my help anymore, then, Shiro?”

Uh-oh.

“Just kidding! Sorry, grandma,” I said quickly.

“Sorry, grandma,” Shiori echoed.

It was nice being able to joke around with grandma like this. If you’d told me a year ago that I would be having this kind of conversation with my grandma again, I wouldn’t have believed you. The three of us stayed up late into the night, trying to decide on a dress to get for Shess.



The next day, I found myself in Akihabara. Because it was Sunday, the main street was pedestrian-only, which meant it only took me a few minutes to get to the shop I had in mind. *That definitely wouldn’t have been possible on a weekday*, I reflected as I entered the cosplay shop.

“Good after—oh, Mr. Amata!” the fortysomething store manager greeted me, readjusting his glasses on his nose. It seemed he remembered me from the time I’d ordered cosplay outfits for Aina and Karen a few months back.

“Long time no see,” I replied. “Thank you so much for handling my request at such short notice last time.”

“Oh, not at all! The staff were incredibly happy to work on your request! Since you asked us to only use the best materials available, they really liked the way the costumes turned out. And just between you and me, when we posted a photo of the two outfits on our homepage, the response was off the scale!” the store manager told me, a broad grin on his face.

“Oh, I’m really glad to hear that,” I replied. “I made the right decision coming to you before.”

All righty. Now that the pleasantries were out of the way, it was time to focus on my current mission.

“So what brings you here today, Mr. Amata? Are you looking to order another custom outfit?” the store manager asked me.

“Bingo. Hold on a sec...” I fished a piece of paper out of my pocket and handed it to the store manager. It was an image of a certain character that I’d printed off at grandma’s place before coming down here. “I’d like to order a cosplay of this character, if possible.”

Grandma, Shiori, and I had settled on the outfit worn by the princess of a really popular game.

“Ooh, *Almighty God’s* Princess Shiny, huh?” the shop manager said, casting a knowing look at me before readjusting his glasses once more. Light reflected off the lenses, making them gleam.

“Do you think it’d be possible?” I asked.

“Of course! Our store’s motto is ‘You dream it, we stitch it,’ after all. However, a cosplay of Princess Shiny? Hm...” He pondered this for a second. “We’re probably looking at a price of around...” The store manager didn’t finish his sentence but raised his hand instead. He indicated 50,000 yen. No, wait, 500,000 yen.

“I see,” I said with a nod. “And how much would it cost for you to make it using only high-quality materials?”

“Please could you tell me *exactly* what you’re looking for?” the shop manager said, readjusting his glasses again, his expression deadly serious.

“Well, first, I’d like something really good-quality for the tiara. I’m not asking for *real* gemstones, naturally, but I basically want the next best thing. Like, colored synthetic diamonds or something. As for the outfit itself, I’d like you to use the finest fabric that’s available to you,” I explained.

“I see, I see. In that case...” The store manager trailed off, the hand he had held up shaking slightly. “Add a zero to the price,” he declared.

“Sure, I don’t mind that,” I said simply.

The man gawked at me. “Mr. Amata. Let me rephrase that to make sure we’re on the same page. The initial price I suggested was 500,000 yen. If you add a zero to that, that means this outfit will cost

you five *million* yen.”

“I was prepared to spend at least that much on it, so that’s fine. Actually...” I paused, opened my backpack, and started rummaging around inside. When I finally found what I was looking for, I grabbed it and put it down on the counter with a thud. “I’d like to pay upfront, if that’s okay. There’s ten million yen there, but if that’s not enough, I can always give you some more.”

The store manager started visibly shaking. He removed his glasses with one hand and covered his face with the other. “Mr. Amata...” he started, his voice trembling. “You’re *exactly* the kind of person I thought you were. I’m now sure of it.”

Was it my imagination or did he sound on the verge of tears? “Uh, pardon me?” I said.

“Please don’t try to hide it from me. Like I said, I’ve figured you out.”

Huh? What the hell’s this guy on about?

But before I could ask him what he meant by that, he explained himself unprompted. “Mr. Amata!” he cried out happily. “You and I are the same! You’ve also dedicated your life to cosplay, haven’t you?”

“What?” I spluttered, but he ignored my stunned surprise.

“And not only that, but you’re not even interested in cosplaying as your favorite characters yourself. You want to see *other people* cosplaying as your chosen characters!”

“What?” I repeated, but he carried on despite my continued befuddlement.

“I’ve got you all figured out, Mr. Amata! Would you like to know how I know? It’s because I’m exactly the same as you! Cosplaying isn’t just about the costume. Oh, no, no, no, no! You also need the perfect cosplayer to wear it! When the cosplayer and the costume combine, that’s when the *real* magic happens, and those 2D girls we both dream about come to life right before our very eyes! The perfect cosplayer and the perfect cosplay! That synergy is what makes miracles happen!”

The store manager grabbed my shoulders tightly and stared at me with bloodshot eyes, his face way too close to mine for my liking.

“*No one* would pay that much for a cosplay, except maybe a company. In fact, I don’t even think a company would pay that much! They’re always trying to barter me down to save some money, telling me they don’t mind if the costume isn’t exactly of the *highest* quality. But *you*, Mr. Amata...”

The store manager threw his arms around me and squeezed with all his might. And when I say “all,” I mean *all*. I was fairly sure he wouldn’t even have hugged the love of his life so tightly.

“Ten million yen upfront, you say? And if that’s not enough, you

can pay more, you say? Please use the highest-quality materials available, you say? Mr. Amata, you're..." He seemed to be struggling to get the words out. "You truly are..." The shop manager paused again, visibly shaking with emotion. "You're a true cosplay shutterbug!"

"A-A what now?" I said.

"I've already told you, you can't hide it from me, Mr. Amata! You want to find the perfect cosplayers to wear outfits of your favorite 2D characters as a way of summoning them into the real world. And naturally, you take pictures of them, so that the moment is recorded forever for you to look back on! I understand. I *totally* understand!" He treated me to two strong slaps on the back. "You just leave it to me, Mr. Amata. As a kindred spirit with the same dreams as you, I will do everything in my power to create the perfect cosplay of Princess Shiny!" He gave me a thumbs-up as a huge smile formed on his face. "I will use the absolute best material available. Don't you worry about a thing!"

"That's, uh, good to hear," was all I managed to say before I hurried out of the store, my order successfully placed. Judging from the shop manager's wild enthusiasm for the project, it sounded like I could look forward to a stellar final result.

And so, after being mistaken for a cosplay shutterbug—whatever that was—I headed back to grandma's house. When I subsequently related the encounter to her and the twins, they all laughed so hard, they almost fell over.

Chapter Fourteen: The Dance Lesson

I was presently sitting in a large room in the royal palace, watching on as Shess had a dance lesson.

“And a one, two, three! One, two, three, turn!” The dance instructor—a woman in her forties—was counting and clapping the beat. “One, two, three! One, two, three, turn!”

If I was being completely honest, the instructor looked scary as hell. She was exactly what you’d imagine a strict dance teacher to look like, and she gazed at Shess with cold, stern eyes. I took out my smartphone to check the time and saw that two hours had passed since the lesson started.

“And one, two, three, and *turn*! No, no. Please stop the music,” the dance instructor ordered, and on cue, the musician stopped playing.

The dance instructor had gone all out for Shess’s lessons to prepare her for the ball, to the point where she’d even brought a trained musician with her to help the little girl get a feel for the kind of music that would be played on the day. I couldn’t help marveling at the extravagance of it all, but then again, Shess *was* a princess. Even her dance lessons were on a totally different scale.

“Your Highness, how many times must I tell you?” the dance instructor said sternly, the heels of her shoes clicking as she went over to stand next to Shess. The man who was acting as Shess’s dance partner for the lesson instantly took two steps back. “I have told you many times now that when you turn, you start with the upper body. Haven’t I told you that?”

Shess didn’t answer but hung her head in shame.

“So why do you insist on turning by moving your upper body *and* your hips at the same time? The correct order is: first, the upper body, then the hips, and last of all, the legs. I cannot even begin to count how many times I have said this during your lesson. Do you perhaps not remember my instructions?” the dance instructor continued.

But Shess remained silent.

“I apologize for what I am about to say, but your dancing isn’t the least bit elegant,” the woman stated.

A choked noise escaped from Shess’s throat region, but she still didn’t say a word in response.

“Now, listen carefully. You have to relax and gracefully execute the steps in time with the music. Your eyes should be on your

partner's face. And above all, you must *smile*. You are not doing any of these things. Let's try again from the beginning."

Shess finally muttered a quiet, "I understand."

The dance instructor waved her hand, and the music restarted.

"And a one, two, three. One, two, three, turn!"

I could see how focused Shess was, and it was clear she was trying her best to execute the steps properly. But...

"Ouch!"

She had accidentally trodden on her dance partner's foot.

"Ouch! Man, that hurt," the man grumbled as he rubbed his foot, glaring at Shess.

"Just how many mistakes do you intend on making today, Your Highness?!" the dance instructor exclaimed, enraged by this display.

Her face red with anger, she started lecturing Shess for the umpteenth time that day. The musician had stopped playing again, and I saw Shess's dance partner turn to him and shrug in an exaggerated manner. In response, the musician simply shook his head and let out a long sigh while looking in Shess's direction. They had been acting like this since the very start of the lesson, and it was obvious these two men were mocking Shess. Of course, they couldn't actually say anything to her on account of her being a princess, but that didn't stop them from gesturing behind her back.

"I've danced so much, I'm utterly exhausted," the dancing partner said to the musician. "And now, my foot hurts."

"Yeah, I saw. Must've been painful," the musician said.

"I don't even remember how many times she's stepped on my foot today. I was in such pain, I couldn't even focus on your beautiful performance."

"Thank you very much, Lord Satz. It is an honor to receive such a compliment from the son of an earl. And Lord Geshue's heir, no less! I must admit, my fingers are getting rather tired as well. If we don't stop soon, I fear they might fall off!" the musician said dramatically.

"Don't worry. This is Princess Shessfelia we're talking about here. She'll master these steps in no time," Shess's dance partner said sarcastically.

"I really hope so," the musician replied, and the two men snickered quietly.

It was obvious they were mocking Shess. While they might not have said anything to her directly, they clearly weren't trying very hard to conceal their snide remarks either. They kept throwing glances in the direction of the little girl with mocking grins plastered across their faces, and Shess had obviously noticed that these men were laughing at her. Children were very sensitive to these kinds of comments, and this must have been especially true for Shess,

considering how she was more or less always in the public eye. She glanced over at the musician and her dance partner, and tightly gripped the hem of her dress, obviously frustrated by what was being said about her.

“Your Highness, are you even listening?” the dance instructor said, her tone tinged with frustration as another sigh escaped her lips. “Your younger sister, Princess Patricia, has already mastered these steps effortlessly. Her grace on the dance floor is nearly at the level of an adult, yet you seem completely unable to remember them, despite being older. Do you feel no shame at that? As a member of the royal family, you must commit these steps to memory and cease bringing such dishonor to His Majesty!”

The dance instructor was growing angrier and angrier, and it looked like she might explode at any second. She seemed like the kind of person who the more she spoke, the angrier she got.

“Let us try it again from the beginning. And please focus this time,” the dance instructor said, gesturing to the musician to start playing once more.

The man looked at Shess and sighed again, but did as instructed.

“And a one, two, three! One, two, three, turn!”

Shess was desperately trying to execute the steps as she clung to her dance partner, the man who’d made fun of her just moments ago.

“And a one, two, three! One, two, three, turn!”

The dance instructor’s hands were all red, which was some indication of just how long this lesson had been going on for, but it seemed she hadn’t noticed, in the same way that she hadn’t noticed that her teaching methods weren’t working.

“And a one, two, three! One, two, three, turn!”

The dance lesson continued for three more hours.



“Stand up, Your Highness. Do you really think this is how a princess of the Giruam Kingdom should behave in public?”

Shess had been dancing for five hours by this point and was lying flat out on the floor, completely out of breath. The dance instructor, however, seemed adamant about continuing the lesson.

Oh, c’mon. At this point, this has gone beyond even a Spartan approach to education. This is just plain torture!

“I will repeat myself only once. Stand up,” the dance instructor ordered, her words as stinging as any whip.

But Shess was far too exhausted to comply and didn’t move an inch from where she was lying on the floor, still trying desperately to catch her breath. The poor thing had been dancing for five hours straight, and there wasn’t an ounce of strength left in her body.

“Good grief. Well, if you cannot stand, I guess we have no choice. Let’s take a fifteen-minute break,” the dance instructor declared.

The second she had uttered those words, the door to the room swung open and Luza bustled in.

“Princess!”

The timing was way too good to be true. I figured she must have been eavesdropping on the dance lesson the whole time. I could easily picture her with her ear glued to the door, trying to figure out what was going on inside.

“Princess, please come with me,” the princess’s escort said. “There is food and hot tea waiting for you.”

Shess grabbed hold of Luza’s hand and let herself be hauled to her feet before leaving the room to try and wind down for the duration of the short break that had been afforded to her.

“That troublesome princess is such a handful,” Shess’s dance partner muttered when she had departed from the room.

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” the musician agreed.

The dance instructor had definitely heard them, but she didn’t even try to put a stop to their grumbling. She probably felt the same way. Though if that was indeed the case, at least she kept her thoughts to herself, which I guess meant she wasn’t quite as rude as the two men.

Thirty minutes passed, and guess what?

Yup, that’s right. Shess didn’t come back.



“What do you *mean* Her Highness has vanished?!” the dance instructor screeched hysterically.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies, Miss Liz. I only turned away for a second, and poof! She was gone,” Luza explained. According to the swordswoman, she had been taking Shess to another room for a snack, when all of a sudden, the little girl had disappeared.

“I do not care for your apology! Find her and bring her back here right away! Queen Eleene *herself* has commanded me to teach Her Highness how to dance! And yet... And yet... Ugh! Just go find her! Quickly!” barked the dance instructor, who was apparently called Miss Liz.

“Yes, ma’am! I shall be right back!” Luza said, bringing her right fist up to the left side of her chest and bowing before scurrying out of the room.

I stood in silence for a few seconds, then announced to no one in particular, “I’ll go with her.” I bustled out of the room, and on spotting Luza beating a hasty retreat down the hallway, I ran to catch up to her. “Miss Luza!” I called out.

“Hm? What are you doing here?” she asked, looking at me with an air of slight suspicion, though her pace didn’t lessen. “Ah, wait!” she suddenly exclaimed as if she’d just thought of something. “Don’t tell me you have *feelings* for me? Is that it?”

“I-I think you may have gotten the wrong idea,” I mumbled. “I just want to help you look for Shess—uh, Princess Shessfelia, I mean.”

“The princess said you didn’t have to use her title,” Luza pointed out.

I chuckled awkwardly. “Yeah, I know, but we’re in the royal palace right now. I don’t particularly want to be sentenced to death just because someone overheard me being ‘disrespectful’ to the princess.”

“Do as you wish. I’m not going to tell you how to address the princess and I won’t stop you if you feel you want to go and look for her either,” Luza said coldly, maintaining her brisk walk that was closer to a half-run.

“In that case, I’ll go with you, if that’s all right. I do have a teensy-tiny question for you, though.”

“What is it?”

Still matching her pace, I looked her square in the eye. “Did you let Shess run away?”

“Wh-What are you—” she spluttered.

“That’s a ‘yes,’ then,” I said, interrupting her.

“H-How *dare* you accuse me of—” she protested, but I cut her off again.

“Please stop trying to deny it. Your reaction has told me everything I need to know.”

I mean, she seriously couldn’t have been more obvious about it if she’d tried. The second I’d asked her if she had let Shess run away, beads of sweat had formed on her forehead and started dripping down her face, and her eyes had darted left and right. All in all, it told me I was right: she *had* purposefully let Shess leave the palace. It seemed I hadn’t been the only one feeling conflicted about the way the dance instructor had been treating Shess, because it was clear Luza must have felt the same, and that was why she had provided an opportunity for the little girl to escape. In short, she had simply wanted to protect her. I could tease her about how bad a liar she was all I wanted, but she really did have Shess’s best interests at heart.

“She must have gone *there* again,” Luza said to me.

“I still think it’s a little *too* dangerous for the first princess of the kingdom to go strolling around the non-hume district without some kind of supervision...” I said. “Couldn’t you at least try suggesting to her that she should go somewhere else when she runs off?”

“Believe me, I have. Many times. But she won’t listen to me. She

says she likes it there, and nowhere else even compares.”

“This must be hard on you too, huh? Every time she goes wandering off, you have to go all the way down to that part of town and search for her for hours on end.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Luza replied.

“Really? Is that because of, like, your honor as a knight or something?” I teased.

Luza shook her head. “No, that’s not it. I made a promise to the princess.”

“A promise?” I asked, intrigued.

Luza glanced at me out of the corner of her eye as we continued our half-jog through the castle. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, before finally explaining. “I come from a long line of knights, you see. Several generations ago, my family was even rewarded with a fiefdom for our achievements.”

“Wait, so your father’s a lord?” I said with some surprise.

“Just shut up and listen,” she said curtly. “All of the men in my family have been knights. But my parents didn’t have a son. Well, naturally, they didn’t want their lineage to end with them, so they were faced with two possibilities: either find me a husband and welcome him into the family, or adopt a son.”

“I see.”

“But our fiefdom is a small one, and most of the people there struggle to even put food on the table, so as you can imagine, no family that already had an heir wanted to let their other sons be adopted or married off when they could be put to work instead. Consequently, all of the men who offered me their hands in marriage were good-for-nothings and I felt like I’d much rather run away than wed any of them. And I almost did. Run away, that is. But then...”

She paused and shook her head, almost as if the memories were painful ones.

“With no son and me refusing to marry, my family was basically done for. But one day, I was crying in a corner of the royal palace when the princess spotted me. She came over to me and asked me why I was crying. I told her everything, and she said...” Luza paused again, cleared her throat, then put on a higher-pitched voice to mimic Shess. ““Then, you should become my knight!””

A warm smile broke out across her face as she recalled those events.

“So thanks to the princess, I became the first—and only—female knight in the kingdom, and my family’s lineage of knights didn’t end with my parents, after all. I can’t imagine how relieved my father must have felt.”

“That’s a very heartwarming story,” I said.

“Isn’t it just? So no matter where the princess goes, I’ll always find her and protect her. That’s the promise I made to her on that day,” Luza explained.

“I see. Should we go down there, then?” I suggested.

“Yeah. But the non-hume district is pretty big,” she said. “So if I start looking for her in the northern part, and you start in the southern part, we can meet in the middle.”

“Pincer movement, huh? Works for me,” I said.

“Let’s be off, then.”

“Lead on.”

Luza and I exited the palace and made a beeline for the non-hume district. When we got there, we parted ways and started our search for Shess.



“Oh, there she is.”

After about twenty minutes of trawling the streets, I finally found Shess sitting atop a wooden crate, watching the sunset. Even from where I was standing, I could tell she was utterly exhausted, which was hardly surprising as she had spent a good five hours dancing. Her body had probably reached its limit a long time ago. She didn’t look like she was going to stand up anytime soon, and to be honest, I wasn’t sure she even *could* stand.

“Good job on the dance lesson,” I called out as I padded up to her from behind.

She swiveled with a start, though as soon as she realized it was me standing there, a frown appeared on her face. “Amata, can I ask you something?” she said.

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Why *were* you watching my dance lesson?” she asked, her tone cold and distant.

I had figured she would ask me what I’d been doing there at some point, though it appeared my presence at her dance lesson had left a bigger impression on her than I’d thought it would. And looking at her expression, the impression I’d left wasn’t a particularly good one. Not that I blamed her for being a bit miffed. After all, I had been there from beginning to end, which meant I’d seen her getting yelled at and mocked. Poor thing was probably deeply abashed.

“I mean, you didn’t *have* to be there. It’s got nothing to do with you. But you stayed for the whole thing!” she grumbled, her voice getting progressively louder.

It wasn’t just the fact that she hadn’t been able to remember the steps properly leading to her teacher yelling at her the entire time that bothered her. Both her dance partner and the musician had made fun

of her throughout. She was angry. She was frustrated. And she was embarrassed that I'd witnessed it all. The sight of me sidling up to her moments ago had caused all of those feelings she had kept bottled up for the past few hours to rear their heads again.

"Were you just there to make fun of me?" she mumbled. "Are you going to laugh at me now, like those men did?"

She had been trying to hold back her tears as she spoke, but it was a losing battle, and they started rolling down her cheeks in rivulets. She didn't try to wipe them away, however. She probably didn't want to admit to herself that she was crying.

"Answer me!"

I hadn't attended Shess's dance lesson with the intention of making fun of her, as was the accusation being put to me. Queen Anielka had asked me to attend. I had arrived at the castle that morning to inform Queen Anielka that the dress would be ready in two weeks' time, and just as I was about to leave, she'd stopped me and said, "Shiro, if you have the time right now, would you please go and watch my daughter's dance lesson?"

To be honest, I'd wanted to refuse. I didn't know the first thing about dancing, so what would be the point of me watching the lesson? I'd just be hanging around in the background like an idiot. But the look in Queen Anielka's eyes gave me pause, because I could see that she was worried about her daughter. Knowing that, I couldn't in good faith decline her request, so I accepted, and that's how I'd ended up watching Shess's entire dance lesson. And having witnessed the whole thing, I now understood why Queen Anielka had asked me to sit in on it. It was rather simple, really: everyone in that room—the teacher, her dance partner, and the musician—had been Shess's enemies. Queen Anielka must have known that, which was why she had asked me to attend. She had wanted to make sure Shess would have at least one ally by her side. To make sure she wasn't all alone.

"Why aren't you answering me?" Shess whined, pulling me out of my thoughts. "I knew it. I knew it all along! You just wanted a good laugh, didn't you? Well, I hope you're satisfied! It must've been hilarious watching me fail time and time again. You can laugh now," she said. She eyed me in silence for a few seconds, then raised her voice. "Go on! Laugh!" I still didn't respond, so she reiterated her instruction, even louder this time. "I told you to *laugh!*"

She sounded borderline hysterical by this point. She was obviously so exhausted, she couldn't keep a lid on her anger any longer.

"I won't laugh," I said to her softly.

Shess blinked in surprise, because she hadn't been expecting this response. I took her by the hand and helped her to her feet.

“Why would I make fun of you?” I continued. “You tried your best. That’s what matters.”

“Y-You still haven’t answered me,” the perplexed little girl said. “I asked you why you were watching the lesson.”

“Well, as you know, I’m just a humble merchant, which means I never get the opportunity to see the kinds of dances nobles learn. I was curious, so I figured I’d come and watch,” I lied.

“Too bad I was the one dancing,” Shess said bitterly. “You probably didn’t learn much. Sorry for ruining the experience for you.”

“What are you apologizing for? You did nothing wrong. It wasn’t *your* fault if you couldn’t do the steps properly. *They* were the ones who set you up to fail.”

“What...” Shess blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Frankly, that dance instructor is a terrible teacher. And don’t even get me started on your dance partner and that musician,” I said.

Shess didn’t say anything. She just stared at me, her eyes wide. She definitely hadn’t been expecting me to blame her teacher for her own inability to remember the steps.

“At this point, you’d be better off taking lessons with me,” I sighed.

Shess shot me a confused look. “You can dance, Amata?”

I didn’t answer immediately. Instead, a (rather mysterious, if I say so myself) smirk formed on my face.

“Shess, I have an idea.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“How about, starting tomorrow, you practice your dancing with me instead?” I suggested.

It took Shess a good ten seconds to respond to this, and even then, the only sound that escaped her mouth was a bewildered “Huh?”



“What?! You can’t dance?!” Luza cried in disbelief.

“What do you mean you can’t dance, Amata?!” Shess exclaimed.

The two of them gawked at me, their voices echoing around the room. It was the next afternoon, and I had returned to the royal palace to fulfill my promise of helping Shess with her dance lessons.

“That’s right. I can’t dance,” I said matter-of-factly.

Shess stared at me wide-eyed, her mouth opening and closing, unable to find a suitable response to this revelation. “Th-Then...” she stuttered before turning her attention to Aina, who was standing next to me. “Then Aina’s the one who’s going to help me practice?” she asked.

“Huh? N-No, I can’t dance either!” the little girl said quickly.

“So who’s going to teach me how to dance?!” Shess exclaimed, her

frustration overflowing. “Luza doesn’t know a thing about dancing either!”

“Oh, doesn’t she?” I asked, turning to Luza.

“I-I’m a knight! Dancing definitely isn’t my thing! *This* is!” she said, patting the sword at her hip.

“I see. Well, looks like we’re in a bit of a pickle, doesn’t it?” I remarked as casually as if we were discussing the weather. “Shess, it looks like you’re the only one here who can dance.”

“Are you *crazy*?” she retorted. “I can’t dance!”

“I know you’re not the *best* dancer in the land, but you’re the only one here who’s had any sort of training. That means you’re the best dancer out of the four of us. Right?”

Shess’s gaze ping-ponged between me, Aina, and Luza, then she let out a long, deep sigh. “I guess I am,” she admitted.

All righty. This is going in the exact direction I wanted it to. “See? So could you teach us the steps?” I suggested.

The little girl stared daggers at me. “Amata, are you stupid or what? You *know* I can’t do them properly!”

“It’s fine, don’t worry. I have a plan,” I said as I took my tablet out of my bag.

“What’s that?” Shess asked, intrigued by the gadget.

“Just watch.”

I entered my passcode, launched the video app, then scrolled through my files until I found the video I was looking for and loaded it up. It was a video of the dance instructor and Shess’s dance partner that I had secretly taken on my phone the day before when the two of them were showing the steps to Shess. I had recorded *everything*—from the easy steps to the more advanced ones—then transferred the whole thing onto my tablet so that we could use the footage to study the moves in our own little dancing session.

Shess gasped in shock when she saw the video. “You...” A huge grin spread across her face. “Amata, good job!”

“Huh?” I said, surprised by her reaction.

Shess pointed at my tablet. “You’ve trapped Liz and that idiot Satz in your little slab thing!” she said excitedly.

“I didn’t!” I said quickly. *C’mon, I’m not Dramom! I can’t do crazy stuff like that!*

“You didn’t?” Shess said, confused by my denial.

“No, I didn’t trap anyone in here. I just recorded them dancing yesterday,” I explained.

Shess didn’t seem to understand, but she didn’t look all that shocked either. “You possess some very weird magic items,” she stated simply.

I shrugged. “Well, I’m a merchant. Anyway, with this handy-

dandy 'magic item,' you can watch the dance through as many times as you like without getting yelled at."

A look of realization flashed across the little girl's face as if she finally understood my plan.

"Not only that, but I recorded the music too. With all that, I'm sure we can learn the dance by ourselves, right?" I said.

Shess thought about this for a few seconds, before finally mumbling a quiet, unconvinced, "I *guess* so..."

I tutted. "Wrong answer. It should be 'Yes!' not 'I guess so!'"

She glared at me, her eyebrows knitted together. "Don't get your hopes up. I still might not be able to learn the steps, even *with* this magic item of yours."

"Or maybe you will," I countered. "You won't know unless you give it a try. C'mon, let's hop to it, yeah? I'll practice with Luza. You can dance with Aina, okay? Let's compete to see who can learn the dance the quickest," I said with a grin.

"Me and Princess Shess?" Aina said, looking a little hesitant. I noticed Shess was also glancing at Aina, trying to gauge her reaction.

"Yup. You two are roughly the same size and age, so it's perfect."

Aina nodded. "O-Okay." She turned to face Shess, then bowed her head. "Are you ready, Princess Shess?"

"Well, I don't really have much choice, do I? Whatever," the little girl said with a shrug, then grabbed Aina by the hand. Despite the rather nonchalant air she was trying to exude, she looked pretty happy to be partnering up with Aina. She was such a little tsundere.

"Should we start dancing too, Miss Luza?" I said, offering my hand to the knight.

But she gave me a death glare. "I-I know what you're up to! You just want to hold my hand, don't you? You *pervert*!"

I blinked at her in bewilderment. "Uh, we're *supposed* to be having a dance lesson here. I just want to practice with you."

"Lay a finger on me and your head will be rolling across this floor!" Luza snarled, placing her hand on the hilt of her sword.

"I knew it'd be hard to get her to agree to dance with me, but I never expected *that* to be her response," I muttered to myself under my breath.

As I stood there racking my brain to come up with some way to convince Luza that I wasn't a pervert, Shess pointed in our direction.

"We can't lose to Amata and Luza, you hear, Aina?" the little girl said haughtily.

"R-Right," Aina mumbled before remembering her manners. "Um, I mean, yes, Princess Shess."

Shess rolled her eyes. "Oh, stop being so polite, will you? We don't have time for all that. Focus on learning the steps."

Aina's eyes widened, but she quickly replied with an eager, "O-Okay!"

And so, the two of them started practicing the steps.



"That's great, Aina! Now, listen to the rhythm. One, two, three, turn!" Shess said, guiding the little girl through the steps.

"Okay! One, two, three, *turn!*" Aina counted aloud before gracefully executing the turn. "I did it! Now it's your turn, Shess!"

"I know," Shess replied with a hint of petulance, before twirling in time with the music.

They were both doing really well in my opinion. Their turns were certainly no worse than the one the dance instructor had demonstrated the previous day, and their performance was light years ahead of Shess's former dance partner.

"How was that?" Shess asked Aina.

"It was amazing! Your dancing's so good, Shess!" Aina enthused, praising her dance partner.

"Hmph! Well, of *course* it is!" Shess preened. "You did quite well too," she added, drawing a giggle from Aina.

"Thank you, Shess!"

The princess humphed haughtily and turned her head to the side, like she always did when she was embarrassed. It seemed the two of them had become fast friends over the course of our little dance lesson. Aina had stopped calling Shess "princess," and not only had Shess not even commented on it, she actually seemed happy about it.

"One more time, Aina!" Shess announced.

The other little girl nodded. "Okay! I'll do it even *better* this time!"

The two of them curtsied to each other, and when the music started, they took each other's hands and started performing the dance. Step, turn. Step, turn. The pair were doing really well, and unlike the previous day, it looked like Shess was having a lot of fun.

I'd actually noticed something during Shess's dance lesson. I hadn't been one hundred percent sure, but it had looked to me like Shess did actually know the dance steps and it was the weight of her instructor's cutting words, her partner's snide remarks, and the musician's disdainful glances that was overwhelming her and throwing her off. I mean, she was only eight, after all. How could she be expected to concentrate on her dancing when she was constantly being ridiculed like that? It had dawned on me at the time that the unhealthy atmosphere was the main reason for Shess's struggles to remember the steps correctly. But here, away from those bullies, she was executing the dance flawlessly and had even managed to teach it to Aina. After all, practicing things with friends always made them a

lot more fun. Back when I was part of my university's wrestling club in my student days, I'd always had such a blast training with everyone. I started fondly reminiscing about those days until Shess's voice pulled me out of my reverie.

"Did you see that, Amata? Aina and I can already do the whole dance!" she boasted as she stood in front of me with her hands on her hips, looking extremely proud of herself. Both she and Aina were slightly out of breath, but their beaming faces radiated a sense of achievement.

"What about you, Amata? Do you remember the steps?" Shess asked.

"Yeah, Mister Shiro, how's it going?" Aina chimed in.

I scratched my head. "Well, that's..." I mumbled, then trailed off as my gaze shifted to Luza.

The knight instantly placed her hand on the hilt of her sword again and chuckled menacingly. "Still haven't given up, huh? You absolute pervert! If you dare to take one more step in my direction, I won't hesitate to end your life, right here and now! And with the sword that is my family's heirloom, no less!"

As such, that day's lesson ended without me or Luza learning a single step.

Intermission

It had been around five days since Shiro and Aina had started spending most of their time up at the royal palace.

“Hey, everyone! Food’s here! It looks really good!” Zidan called out to the others as the inn’s maids brought tray after tray into the suite.

The Thunderbird’s Roost was one of the most luxurious inns in the royal capital, and as such, its cooks were considered some of the finest in the entire kingdom. A lot of people actually booked rooms in the Thunderbird’s Roost purely so they could sample the food on offer. However, when Patty and Celes brought their spoons up to their mouths, they simply shook their heads.

“Still mediocre,” Celes declared.

Patty hummed. “Everything’s just so bland here. The food in Ninoritch is *much* better than this!”

The two of them sounded really letdown. Dramom didn’t say anything, but sighed deeply, unable to hide her own disappointment. Even little Suama couldn’t help letting out a little whine. Back in Ninoritch, she had shoveled food into her mouth at light speed, but with this meal in front of her, she could barely muster the enthusiasm to bring her fork up to her mouth. Zidan—whom Shiro had entrusted with looking after his four companions—gazed at them all in bewilderment.

“You don’t like it? I think it’s delicious!” he said.

But the others didn’t say a word in response. Back in Ninoritch, due to Shiro’s influence, everyone had started using seasonings that were truly magical. One seasoning in particular could turn a simple bowl of hot water into a delicious soup just by adding a single spoonful of the stuff. Consequently, the collective palates of the townsfolk had adjusted to this higher standard of cuisine, and the inn’s bleak food just wasn’t cutting it. The capital was renowned for having a wide range of delicious food with ingredients from all over the world, but it somehow still paled in comparison to a little town out in the middle of nowhere. Even so, Celes and the Immortal Dragon mother-and-daughter pair had to satiate their near-bottomless appetites *somehow*, so this bland feast would have to do.

“Zidan, order seven more plates of this dish here, and five more of that roast meat there,” Celes commanded.

“And could you please order eight more of this dish, that dish, and that one over there, if it is not too much bother?” Dramom asked.

“Ma-ma! Dis! Dis!” Suama babbled, pointing to a fish dish on the table.

“You want more of that, Suama?” her mother asked her daughter, who nodded enthusiastically. “All right. Mr. Zidan, could you please order five more of this dish too? My daughter would like to eat some more of it.”

But Zidan just sat there in complete silence, his jaw firmly on the floor.

“Mr. Zidan? Did you hear me?” Dramom tried again, casting a concerned look in the direction of the birdman.

This seemed to drag Zidan out of his stunned daze. “H-Huh? Oh, right! I’ll order some more, then.”

A chuckle escaped Dramom’s lips. “Sorry about this. Growing children eat a lot, you see.”

“Oh, and can you get me some fruit while you’re at it?” Patty piped up. “Like, a *mountain* of fruit!”

Zidan’s face was white as a sheet as he went to place their orders.



“Zidan, could you please make sure nothing happens to the others while Aina and I are over at the palace?” Shiro had asked Zidan a few days earlier.

Naturally, Zidan had confidently replied, “Yup! Leave it to me!”

After all, Shiro *had* come all the way to the capital for him, so helping him out was the least Zidan could do. He swore to the god of business and to his dead father’s spirit that he would do everything in his power to carry out Shiro’s request. His friend and partner was doing his utmost to help him out, so Zidan felt he had to return the favor.

However, Shiro’s four companions were rather *eccentric*, to say the least. Not only was there a fairy among their number, Celes and Dramom were real oddballs too, both in how they spoke and the way they acted. And Suama was so cute and small; what if she got spirited away by ruffians? No, Zidan decided he couldn’t let them leave the inn. He locked them in the suite and tried to divert their attention by ordering food whenever they started feeling hungry. But his coin purse was getting lighter and lighter, and he didn’t know how much longer he could keep this up. *Shiro, I’m begging you! Please come back soon!* Zidan yelled internally.



The five of them were happily enjoying their meal, when all of a sudden, Celes's gaze darted to the window.

"They are watching us again," she stated.

"Huh? What do you mean? Someone's watching us?" Zidan asked, rather confused.

"Yes," Celes said matter-of-factly. "Someone has been observing us ever since we arrived."

Zidan felt himself starting to panic at what Celes was telling him. He was a businessman, after all, and not just any old merchant, but the guildmaster of a merchant guild. And now it turned out that someone was *spying* on him? He already stood out in the royal capital as it was, what with him being one of the only beastmen in the city, but he now had to worry about this potential threat to him too? Anyone would panic at that prospect!

"Who could be spying on us?" he babbled, hurriedly getting up from his seat. "Bart maybe? Or Queen Eleene? Ah! Don't tell me it's someone from one of those underground gui—"

Dramom interrupted him. "Mr. Zidan, please calm down."

"Yeah. If you start getting in a flap like that, the guys who are watching us are gonna notice," Patty added.

"Y-You're right," Zidan said. He took a few deep breaths, then sat back down in his chair. He was still panicking inside, though.

"Shiro told us to 'behave,' but I do not appreciate being spied on," Celes said. "I will get rid of them. They will not come back afterward, believe me."

She made a move to stand up, but Dramom quickly stopped her. "No."

"Why not?" Celes asked.

"While it is true that you or I could easily eliminate these nosy people, we have to respect our master's commands, and his only command was for us to 'behave.' Besides, they are insignificant beings. Leave them be," Dramom said.

"D-Dramom's right, Celes! Shiro's your boss and he told you to behave. And underlings should always listen to their boss!" Patty added.

Celes clicked her tongue in annoyance, then stormed out of the communal area and locked herself in the room she had been assigned.

Shiro, please come back soon! Zidan internally begged once more.

Chapter Fifteen: Bart's Proposition

It had been ten days since we'd started our impromptu "dance lessons," and Aina and Shess were making tremendous progress, to the point where they could nail even the more advanced steps. It just went to show how big a part the environment played when learning a new skill.

"Amata, come back tomorrow. I-I'll dance with you in place of Luza, okay? So you'd better be here!" Shess ordered, standing in a power pose with her hands firmly on her hips.

"What an honor, Your Highness," I replied with a chuckle. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Just so you know, I'm a strict teacher," she warned. "I hope you'll be ready."

"Don't be too harsh on me, okay?"

Shess humphed and haughtily turned her head to the side. Despite my best efforts, she was still acting all aloof with me, which was in complete contrast to her attitude toward Aina.

"You're coming too, right, Aina?" the princess asked her friend eagerly. "Promise you will!"

"Of course, Shess! It's a promise. I wanna dance with you again!" Aina said, grabbing Shess's hands in hers.

The young princess didn't protest. Quite the opposite, actually. She seemed happy. Aina really was the only person Shess didn't give attitude, and watching the two of them, I couldn't help smiling, because when she was with Aina, Shess wasn't the scorned first princess of the kingdom; she was simply an eight-year-old girl having fun with her friend. I was fairly certain Queen Anielka would have been shedding a tear or two of joy if she had been here to see her daughter looking so happy. Luza was definitely having a hard time keeping it together while watching this heartwarming scene, and it wasn't long before she started tearing up.

"Princeeeees!" she wailed as she brought a handkerchief up to her eyes to wipe away the tears, then used it to blow her nose loudly. She must have been really moved by the fact that Shess had made a friend. I made a mental note to bring a pack of tissues for her the next day.

"See you tomorrow," I said to the princess and her sobbing knight.

"Bye-bye, Shess!" Aina chirruped, and the two of us departed the

royal palace.

But just as we were about to climb into the carriage that Queen Anielka had laid on for us, I heard a voice from behind.

“Good evening, Mr. Shiro.”

I turned and saw that the voice belonged to Bart.

“How very kind of you to keep Princess Shessfelia company until this late hour,” he said as he made his way toward us with four brawny men (his bodyguards, possibly?) in tow.

“Mister Shiro...” Aina mumbled, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tightly. The sight of Bart and his entourage must have made her a little scared, so I squeezed back to reassure her, then took one step toward Bart, maneuvering myself in front of the little girl to act as a shield.

“Good evening, Mr. Bart,” I replied. “What a coincidence, running into you so late in the day.”

The man chuckled self-importantly. “Actually, I was waiting for you to leave the palace.”

“Oh, really? And what can I do for you exactly?”

“I have a little request for you, if you’ll listen,” he said, flashing me a smile so saccharine sweet, there was no way it was sincere.

“I find it hard to believe that an adept merchant like yourself would need *my* help,” I said with a frown.

“I really do! Could you please hear me out, Mr. Shiro?” he asked. I stayed silent for a few seconds, which elicited a chuckle from Bart.

“Oh, come on. There’s no need to be so on edge around me! And besides, I wouldn’t be the only one benefiting from this. You would too.”

“I can only assume it’s related to our respective businesses, then,” I muttered before relenting. “Fine. I’ll listen to what you have to say. But first...” I turned to the little girl behind me. “Aina?”

She hummed quizzically and looked up into my eyes. I gently placed my hand on her head.

“I’m gonna go have a little chat with Mr. Bart here. Do you think you could go back to the inn on your own?” I said to the little girl.

“I can wait here for you,” she offered.

“That’s really kind of you, but I probably won’t have this wrapped up until quite late, and we wouldn’t want you losing sleep because of me, now would we? You’ve been dancing a lot recently, so it’s important you get your rest.”

“Well, that’s true, but...” she conceded.

“And besides, if we both get back late...” I trailed off.

“If we both get back late?” Aina repeated, her head tilted to one side with a confused look on her face.

I sighed. “Celes and Dramom will start getting worried, don’t you

think? So you have to go let them know that I'll be back late."

Aina's eyes widened in realization and she nodded firmly. She was probably every bit as worried as I was about what those two might do if they thought we had gone missing—*especially* Dramom, who had already mentioned several times that she had no qualms about killing everyone in the city if they were causing us too much trouble.

"Okay," the little girl said. "I'll go back and tell Miss Celes and Miss Dramom that you're gonna be back late tonight."

"Thanks, Aina. Oh, and say hi to Patty for me too, yeah?"

"Okay!" the little girl replied, then she climbed into the carriage.

I waved her off, and once she was out of sight, I turned my attention back to my fellow merchant. "Sorry for making you wait, Mr. Bart. We can talk all you like now."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Shiro," he replied with an overly exaggerated chuckle. "I know of a tavern nearby that serves some very nice drinks. Alcoholic ones, of course. What do you say to discussing our small matter there? We can use this opportunity to get to know each other a little better."

I nodded and followed him as he led the way to his tavern of choice.



Once inside the tavern, we sat down at the bar and ordered our drinks.

"To start, let's raise a toast and wish each other good luck in our business endeavors, shall we?" Bart suggested, and I reluctantly clinked my glass against his. "I love the fact that everything is served in glass goblets here. Alcohol just tastes so much better when it's served in high-quality receptacles, wouldn't you say?" He added that only people of high standing were allowed in here, and went on to regale me with the entire history of the place, even though I hadn't asked.

When he was done with his little history lesson, a look of realization flashed across his face as if he'd just remembered something. "You know, I've heard Princess Shessfelia has become quite the little dancer, thanks to you," he said, changing the topic completely with a knowing smirk on his face.

I, on the other hand, was doing everything possible to make sure my surprise didn't show on my face. "Huh, that's odd. Those lessons have always been held exclusively between the four of us, so how could you have heard about them?" I asked, corraling my expression into the most neutral one I could manage.

Bart chuckled. "Queen Eleene knows *everything* that goes on in the royal palace, and she just so happened to mention it to me."

“She’s been spying on us?” I said through gritted teeth, unable to hide my displeasure.

Bart simply shrugged. “Well, I can’t say exactly *how* she came by her information. She simply told me that Her Highness had made tremendous progress.”

I didn’t say anything to this, so he continued. “I can’t believe you’ve managed to tame *the* Princess Shessfelia. If you have any advice on how to get into people’s good graces, I would *love* to hear it. You are obviously a master at it. However, I must say...” Bart paused briefly. “Teaching the princess how to dance was a bit of a bad move, Mr. Shiro.”

“How so?” I inquired.

“Well, let’s just say you might have, ah, awakened the dragon,” he replied cryptically.

“The dragon?”

“I’m talking about Queen Eleene. If you hadn’t taught Princess Shessfelia how to dance, Queen Eleene—the dragon—would have continued to snooze. However, you have gone and disturbed her slumber,” Bart said, slapping his forehead with his palm to show just how dire he thought the situation was. “Queen Eleene wanted that ball to be her daughter Princess Patricia’s grand society debut. She wanted all eyes to be on her.”

“You’re forgetting to mention the fact that she planned to do that by having Princess Shessfelia make a fool of herself,” I retorted, feeling my blood starting to boil.

Bart chuckled once more. “My, my. You do have a sharp tongue, don’t you, Mr. Shiro? Though I am afraid you are right on that. By having an excellent dancer like Princess Patricia dance next to Princess Shessfelia, who until recently was anything but, there would be no question over who would have been the center of attention at the ball.”

“And you’re saying I’ve ruined that,” I concluded for him.

“Oh, I *personally* don’t think anything of the sort. Queen Eleene, on the other hand...”

It turned out my little dancing plan had put Shess on the receiving end of the second queen consort’s ire.

“As a fellow merchant, I’ll be honest with you. Queen Eleene is a rather *difficult* woman. She loses her temper easily when things don’t go her way, and even His Majesty has a tough time calming her down when she flies into a rage. So to prevent anything like that happening, I have a proposition for you, Mr. Shiro,” Bart said.

“And what might that be?” I asked after a short pause to take this all in.

My response drew another chuckle out of Bart. “As we’re both

merchants, I'll get straight to the point." He paused as an unpleasant smirk curled his lips upward. "Do you think you could see your way to letting me procure Princess Shessfelia's dress for the ball?"

What the hell?

"I'm guessing that isn't a joke, right?" I said coldly.

"You guess right. I'm always serious when it comes to business."

"I see," I said. "So you actually meant to ask me that."

"I did, yes."

"Well, I only have one word in response to that." I grabbed my glass, drained the contents in one swig, slammed it down on the bar, and stood up. "And that word is 'no.' Now, as it seems we're done here, I'll get going, if you don't—"

"Ah, wait, Mr. Shiro. I understand you're a very busy man, but we haven't even started the negotiations. Please sit down," Bart said, gesturing to my seat.

I glanced over at Bart's bodyguards who were loitering around at the back of the tavern. Their eyes were all firmly fixed on me and their gazes were clearly telling me that I should sit right back down or there would be consequences. I considered making a run for it, but in the end, I decided against it. After all, this matter concerned Shess, so I had to know exactly what Bart was scheming.

"Fine," I said, sitting down again.

"Please just listen to what I have to say. I am not asking you to let me procure Princess Shessfelia's dress for my own benefit. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I'm doing this for *you*," Bart said.

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

"I hold you in the highest of regard, Mr. Shiro. I believe—no, I *know* the dress you will produce for Princess Shessfelia will be every bit as exquisite—if not more so—than the one you procured for that woman you accompanied to the earl's banquet in Mazela. And no matter how much I try to compete, I am certain the dress I will furnish Princess Patricia with won't be a patch on what you are able to produce."

"Perhaps it will," I said.

"You are much too modest. You shouldn't belittle your own talents, Mr. Shiro. It'll only make other merchants even more envious of you," he cautioned. "Anyway, back to the matter of the dress."

Bart paused to drain the last of his drink, then got the bartender to refill our glasses. With full drinks in front of us once more, the merchant turned back to me. "Mr. Shiro, if you produce a dress for Princess Shessfelia now that she knows how to dance, she will completely outshine Princess Patricia. And if that happens..." He

sucked air in through his teeth. “Let’s just say that Queen Eleene’s fury will know no bounds. Queen Eleene has a very *fiery* temper, you see. It might be due to her being born into a rather affluent family, but she flares up over the slightest trifling issue.”

I nodded. “I’ve heard she’s the daughter of a duke.”

“That’s right. Now, unfortunately, this means that if Princess Shessfelia overshadows Princess Patricia at the ball, the promise Queen Anielka made to you might well be rendered null and void.”

“You mean the one where she said she would authorize us to open a branch of the Eternal Promise here?” I asked.

“That’s the one,” Bart said with a nod. “If Queen Eleene were to decide that you should *not* be allowed to open a branch of your guild in the royal capital, then I’m afraid even Queen Anielka wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.”

Come to think of it, Zidan had mentioned something to me about how the second queen consort wielded more power than Queen Anielka, so what Bart was saying wasn’t entirely implausible.

“All of your efforts would be for naught if you angered Queen Eleene. And no *merchant* in their right mind would invest in something they knew was bound to fail,” Bart added, placing extra emphasis on the word “merchant,” almost as if he was suggesting that I wasn’t a “real” merchant because I hadn’t figured this out for myself. “Do you understand what I’m saying? If Princess Shessfelia puts Princess Patricia in the shade at the ball, then not only can you kiss your dreams of opening up a branch of the Eternal Promise in the capital goodbye, but I will also lose the trust of Queen Eleene. We’d both suffer.”

“Yes, I see your point,” I said.

“Oh, that is good to hear. Then, allow me to repeat my request: please let me procure Princess Shessfelia’s dress for her. Oh, but rest assured, I won’t give her something ridiculous to wear or anything like that. I’ll find a dress that’s a little plainer than Princess Patricia’s, that’s all. Just a little, I promise,” Bart said, illustrating his point by holding up his hand and bringing his thumb and forefinger together. Of course, you generally left at least a bit of a gap between the finger and thumb to emphasize the “little” part of the statement, but as Bart hadn’t, the gesture lost all meaning.

“If you agree, Queen Eleene won’t have any reason to complain. Plus, it’s not even as if Princess Shessfelia will make a fool of herself at the ball, as you have so kindly taught her how to dance,” Bart insisted.

I remained silent.

“And I will *personally* help you set up your *own* merchant guild in the royal capital, which means you won’t have to stay in that birdman’s guild. Yes, you’ll be able to start your own! What do you

say, Mr. Shiro? Let me tell you, I *never* make such extreme concessions. An opportunity like this might never present itself again,” Bart declared, a self-satisfied smile on his face, as if he was sure I would accept his proposition.

I pondered on the question that had been put to me for a few seconds. As a businessman, if I really wanted to maximize my profits, then letting Bart furnish Shess with a dress did indeed seem like the best course of action. However, I’d seen firsthand just how hard Shess had been working over the past few days. She’d spent so much time rehearsing with Aina, and I’d witnessed her go from a sullen princess to a happy little girl. I couldn’t bring myself to let all that effort go to waste.

“I apologize, Mr. Bart, but my answer remains unchanged. I won’t be handing over the task of procuring Princess Shessfelia’s dress to you,” I told him.

Bart seemed shocked by my reply. “You dare to refuse *my* request?”

“It doesn’t matter who is making the request. I promised Princess Shessfelia I would furnish her with the most beautiful dress in the entire kingdom. I can’t go back on my word.”

It only took a split second for the saccharine-sweet smile on Bart’s face to disappear. “I see. Did you know, Mr. Shiro, that all of the merchants who have crossed me have *somehow* ended up meeting with unfortunate fates? I can only assume the god of business must have abandoned them. Some drowned in the canal, others were killed by bandits... I believe one poor fellow was even burned to death. Quite a tragic series of events, wouldn’t you agree? All because they were abandoned by the god of business!”

Bart let out a melodramatic sigh, but I could tell he didn’t feel sorry for these men in the slightest. If I had to guess, I would’ve said he actually found the whole thing amusing.

“The god of business loves me, you see,” he said pointedly. “And if you refuse my proposal, he might just abandon you too...”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked.

“Oh, no, I would never!” the man exclaimed, as if taking offense at the mere suggestion. “I swear to the god of business that I would never do anything of the sort. However...” He paused. “I’m sure you’ve heard the saying, yes? ‘The god of business is fickle.’ You never know when the tide might turn. Of course, I hope *your* business will continue thriving, but one can never tell what the future holds. I mean, who knows what might happen to that birdman associate of yours? Oh, and I believe you have an assistant, yes? That little girl from earlier. I *really* hope nothing bad happens to her.”

With his point made, Bart got up from his chair and placed a hand

on my shoulder. “Please think carefully on it, Mr. Shiro. Really, *really* carefully.” He punctuated his sentence with another nasal chuckle before striding out of the tavern.

I gulped down the rest of my drink, then headed back to the Thunderbird’s Roost inn.



“So yeah, that’s pretty much the gist of it.”

As soon as I got back to the inn, I recounted my conversation with Bart to my companions, minus Aina and Suama, who were asleep.

“So it looks like if I *don’t* agree to Bart’s request, some ‘unfortunate’ things might start befalling us,” I said, trying to keep as quiet as possible so that I didn’t wake up Aina and Suama, who were in a room adjacent to the communal area. Dramom, however, didn’t seem to have gotten the memo.

“That man *threatened* you, master?! That is simply unacceptable. I shall reduce him and this entire city to ash!” the dragon woman raged, her voice much louder than usual.

“Please don’t drag the people of the capital into this. They’ve done nothing wrong,” I said with a sigh.

“But, master—” Dramom started to argue, but I cut her off.

“Dramom, please keep your voice down. You’ll wake the girls up.”

“Shiro’s right! Zip it, Dramom! Shhh!” Patty said, backing me up.

Patty and I simultaneously put our index fingers to our lips to tell Dramom to hush. A look of surprise flashed across her face, as if she had only just recognized her own blunder.



"I apologize, master. I lost my composure," she said, lowering her head.

I wasn't sure how much more I could take of this whole "master" thing. I really hoped she would ease up on it soon.

Zidan mused on the predicament. "Bart does have ties to those underground guilds I told you about, so we might really be in danger here. Those weren't empty threats."

As a resident of Mazela, he was much more familiar with Bart and his methods than I was, and he knew the slimy merchant wasn't the type to joke around about these sorts of things.

"I see. So in short, if Shess's debutante ball goes well, Bart's really going to try to have us killed, huh?"

Zidan nodded gravely. "Yup."

"Well, that's not ideal," I said. "I guess I could put in a request down at the Adventurers' Guild and get them to protect us from assassins or something."

"But what if the adventurers they assign to the task turn out to be Bart's henchmen?" Zidan countered.

I chuckled. "You're right. I didn't think of that."

Zidan looked at me in disbelief. He must have been shocked by how nonchalantly I was taking the whole situation.

"Shiro, that man threatened to end your life. Why are you laughing? Are you not afraid?" Celes asked me.

I hummed. "It's not that I'm not afraid exactly. I guess I'm just not all that bothered about it."

"So you believe it was an empty threat, after all?" she said.

"Nope."

Celes raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Then why? Enlighten me."

"Well, it's very simple. I have no reason to be scared of him because I have you and Dramom by my side. Oh, and Patty too, of course. Not only are you strong enough to protect the rest of us, but Bart doesn't even know of your existence. So truthfully, his threats hold little weight in my eyes," I said.

Celes nodded. "I-I see."

"Aw, master. You say such sweet things!" Dramom cooed.

The two of them were blushing.

"I still think we should be careful, though, just in case," I said before turning to the demon beside me. "Celes."

"What is it?"

"Could you please guard Zidan and make sure nothing happens to him?" I asked her.

"I have told you before that my body is yours to do with as you please. If that is your command, I shall protect the birdman with my

life,” she replied.

“Again, it’s not a command, it’s a *request*,” I stressed. I turned to Dramom next. “Dramom.”

“Yes, master?”

“I’m leaving Suama in your care, all right? Keep her safe.”

“Of course.”

Lastly, I turned to Patty. “Boss.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“I want you to stay in Aina’s backpack so that you can protect the two of us at all times,” I said. “Will you be okay with that?”

The little fairy puffed out her chest with pride and gave a firm nod. “Of course! I’m your boss after all! It’s my job to keep you safe. You just leave it to me!”

The combined strength of these three was easily enough to destroy a whole country if they wanted to, so Bart’s threats and scheming didn’t bother me all that much. All I had to do was focus on the task I’d been assigned and make sure the debutante ball went swimmingly. After all, this whole thing was for Shess’s sake.

Chapter Sixteen: Shess and the Dress

“Hey, Shess, I’ve got your dress!” I announced on my arrival at the royal palace.

It was a week before the ball. Earlier that day, I’d gone to the cosplay store in Akihabara to pick up my order before “logging into” Ruffaltio as soon as I’d gotten back home again, before heading to the royal palace with Aina.

“That was fast,” Shess remarked. “It’s done already?”

“I paid extra so it’d be finished early,” I explained.

The four of us (plus Patty, who was hiding in Aina’s backpack) had gathered as always in the room we used for Shess’s dance lessons.

“Wanna see it?” I asked Shess.

“Quit dillydallying and show me right now!” she said impatiently.

“Okay, okay. Aina?” I said, prompting the little girl with a knowing grin.

“Right! Um, sorry about this, Shess, but lemme just...” She walked around behind Shess and covered the little girl’s eyes with her hands.

“Huh? What are you doing, Aina?” Shess exclaimed, which drew a little chuckle from Aina.

“We want to surprise you,” she said to her friend.

Shess hummed. “Oh, is that so? Fine then, I guess. But maybe I won’t be surprised. That all depends on how good Amata’s dress is,” she said, placing her hands on her hips as if giving us a signal that she was ready to see the dress now.

During this little exchange, Luza had been scanning the room, her brow furrowed in apparent bewilderment. “Amata, where *is* the dress? I don’t see it anywhere. Don’t tell me it’s in there,” she said, side-eyeing the bag I was holding.

“Oh, but it is!” I reached a hand into the bag, activated my Inventory skill inside it, and retrieved the mannequin I had placed the gown on. My little sleight of hand made it look like it had been in my bag all along.

“Wha...” Luza gasped, gawking at me. “Is there an Inventory enchantment on that bag?”

Her reaction didn’t surprise me one bit. The Inventory skill was an incredibly rare ability, and items enchanted with it sold for crazy money.

“Well, I *am* a merchant, after all. Most of us would do practically

anything to get our hands on an item with an in-built Inventory function. It took me a really long time to save up enough to be able to afford this little beauty, but it was well worth it,” I said, tenderly stroking the bag to help sell the lie, a proud smile plastered across my face.

Of course, the bag was nothing special in and of itself. It was just an ordinary bag I’d bought at a small shop in the station complex the last time I took the train. The reason I’d decided to lie about it was quite simple: now that I knew Queen Eleene was spying on Shess’s every move, I didn’t want to reveal anything more than was necessary, and that included the fact that I could use the Inventory skill.

Shifting my focus back to the mannequin, I gazed at the dress. It was as stunning as you’d expect a five-million-yen cosplay outfit to be, and it was an exact facsimile of the image I had given to the cosplay store manager. Any fan of the game would have been absolutely green with envy if they saw it.

“Wow, it’s so cute!” Aina marveled, her eyes sparkling.

“Ooh! What a beautiful dress! It will suit the princess perfectly!” Luza exclaimed.

The two of them stared at the dress in awe. Meanwhile, Shess was growing impatient.

“Aina! When are you going to let me see my dress?” she asked. The princess still had her hands on her hips, but she was starting to fidget in anticipation.

“Ah, sorry, Shess!” Aina replied. “I’m removing my hands now, okay? Are you ready?”

“Of course I am!”

“Kay! Then...” Aina paused momentarily. “Here you go!” she announced as she lifted her hands.

As soon as Shess’s eyes landed on the dress, her mouth fell open in amazement. If I had to describe the style of the dress, I’d say it was similar to a high-low ballgown. The skirt part was extremely poofy, with the front part of it stopping just above the knee, while the back cascaded all the way down to the floor. The whole thing was mostly white, aside from the caramel-colored corsages that adorned the base of the throat, hips, and gloves, and the skirt’s lining, which was a beautiful deep blue to match Shess’s eye color. The more I looked at it, the more I felt I needed to revise my initial assessment. Instead of looking just like the dress in the picture, I was starting to think it might look even *better* than the original.

“So pretty...” Shess uttered, the words escaping her lips with genuine emotion attached to them.

Good, I thought. She seems to really like it.

She extended a hand toward the dress and gently grazed the fabric

with her fingers. “This is...” she mumbled. “Silk? And cotton?”

“Oh, you have a keen eye! Yup, that’s right. The manager at the cospla—uh, I mean, the dressmaker said this cospla—this *dress* was made using silk and cotton.”

“Silk and *cotton*?” Luza blurted out, her jaw hitting the floor. She seemed genuinely shocked by this.

“Y-Yeah...” I said slowly. “Is there a problem with that?”

“A-A-Are you *kidding*?!” she stammered. “This is cotton we’re talking about here! *Cotton*!”

She went on to explain how most tailors made their garments out of linen in the Giruam Kingdom, while silk clothing was a luxury reserved only for nobles and affluent merchants. But cotton? Well, that was a whole other league entirely. Since cotton plants refused to grow in the kingdom or in any of its neighboring nations, the material had to be imported from pretty much the other side of the world, which made it even more expensive than silk. A mere scrap of cotton fabric would sell for an absolute fortune, and even the wealthiest of nobles could barely afford anything made from it.

Whoa, hold on a sec. Something had just occurred to me. Shiori and Saori sold a lot of cotton clothing in their shop in Ninoritch. In fact, I was pretty sure nearly every single person in town owned *at least* one T-shirt made out of pure cotton. It would appear that, because of us Amata siblings, the people of Ninoritch had—quite by accident—become wealthier than even the richest citizens in the royal capital.

“Huh. I had no idea cotton was considered such a luxury here. If I’d known, I would’ve asked the dressmaker to make the whole thing out of cotton.”

“*What*?!” Luza shrieked, and her mouth was gaping so wide by this point, I was scared her jaw was going to dislocate. Though, considering three measly copper coins was the extent of her wealth, perhaps it wasn’t so surprising that she was finding it hard to even fathom the idea of having enough money to buy the amount of cotton you’d need to make an entire dress out of the stuff.

“Anyway, Shess, why don’t you try it on?” I suggested to the little girl.

“Can I?” she asked, sounding a lot meeker than usual.

“Of course. It is yours, after all,” I reminded her.

“Okay,” she said with a timid nod. She must have been feeling very nervous about the idea of putting on such a beautiful gown.

“Well, I’ll step out for a bit, then. Aina, you stay here and help Miss Luza get the dress on Shess, okay? Oh, and here are the shoes and accessories to go with it,” I added, producing two boxes out of my bag and handing them to Aina.

The little girl took them with a little “Hup!” and nodded. “I’ll make sure Shess looks super cute!”

I smiled. “Thanks, Aina. I’ll leave it to you, then.”

“Right!”

“And you too, Miss Luza.”

“O-Okay. I-I-I just have to get the d-d-dress on the princess, right? I-I-I can do that,” the knight stuttered. She was shaking like a leaf at the idea of having to handle such an expensive dress. It must have seemed like rather a daunting task to her.

“I’ll wait outside the door, okay? Let me know when you’re done,” I said before stepping out into the hallway.



“Mister Shiro, we’re all done!” Aina called out to me after a little while.

I walked back into the room and was greeted by the sight of Shess in the dress, her face as red as a tomato.

“H-How does it look?” she asked me.

The tiara on her head was encrusted with red gemstones (lab-created rubies), and I felt the ribbons on her shoes added a really nice finishing touch to the whole outfit. A pair of gloves adorned with the same color corsages as the ones on her dress completed the look. Any fan of the game would have immediately been moved to tears on seeing such a beautiful cosplay outfit. To use the cosplay store manager’s words, it was as if we had brought the original 2D character to life.

“Wow, Shess! You look really cute,” I said, complimenting the little girl.

She wordlessly hung her head, her face going even redder.

“Wanna see what you look like?” I asked as I produced a full-length mirror from my bag-slash-inventory. “Heave-ho! Here, take a look, Shess.”

She still didn’t say a word, but she slowly lifted her head, gazing first at the shoes, then the skirt... But when her eyes landed on her hair, her little face scrunched up.

“Shess?” Aina said, noticing her friend’s reaction.

But Shess remained silent.

“What’s wrong, Shess?” I tried.

“I... I...” the little girl stammered before bursting out sobbing, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She had seemed so happy earlier. What had happened?

“P-Princess? Are you all right?” Luza inquired urgently.

“Are you hurt somewhere?” Aina said.

The three of us were genuinely anxious, wondering what could

have caused this sudden shift in the little girl's mood.

"This dress..." Shess finally mumbled through her sniffing after a few seconds. "I don't look good in it."

"What do you mean? You look totally *adorable*!" I protested. "I really, really mean that."

"No, I don't!" she said, vigorously shaking her head left and right. "It doesn't suit me! It's not the dress. The dress is beautiful. I'm sure it'd look amazing on Patricia. But..." She paused as she brought her shaking hands up to her hair. "My hair's so ugly, no dress will *ever* suit me! I just look ridiculous!" she wailed, her body wracked with sobs. "Because of my hair, I... I..."

She bit her bottom lip to try to calm herself down, and once she had regained some of her composure, she started telling us about all the difficult times she had suffered through because of her unruly hair.

Intermission

It had almost been like a curse.

“Look, it’s the beast princess!”

“Oh, wow, you’re right. Her hair looks just like the mane of a wild beast, doesn’t it?”

Shess couldn’t have been older than three or four the first time she heard those words. She was too young to understand right from wrong, but people were already mocking her behind her back, and all because of her frizzy hair. She was Queen Anielka’s daughter and the first princess of the kingdom. People *should* have respected her. But there was one person who couldn’t accept that.

“Shessfelia, your hair looks just like the mane of a wild beast,” Queen Eleene was forever telling her.

Coming from a wealthy and respected family, she wielded more power than Shessfelia’s own mother even though she was the second queen consort. The woman disliked Shessfelia intensely and never passed up an opportunity to mock the little girl. And with no allies in the royal palace aside from her mother, Shessfelia couldn’t do a thing about Queen Eleene’s hostility toward her, so she decided she would simply have to endure it, reasoning that as long as she was the only target of Queen Eleene’s ire, she could put up with it. However...

“Have you heard that certain individuals have been questioning your loyalty to His Majesty, dear sister? They speculate that Shessfelia isn’t his daughter,” Queen Eleene had once said to her mother, her words dripping with venom.

And the reason these rumors were circulating was all because of Shessfelia’s hair yet again. The little girl felt incredibly sorry for her mother for having to go through all of that, just because she had stupid, frizzy hair.

If only my hair looked more like my parents’...

Not a single day passed where Shessfelia didn’t think that. After all, how could she not think like that? Her mother was being tormented because of her hair.

Then, Shessfelia had an idea. If her conduct was beyond reproach, then she would surely be able to help her mother clear her name and fix her reputation! She worked really hard at her lessons and always tried to act in a way that was befitting of a princess. But it wasn’t enough.

“Princess Shessfelia, it is clear your hair is bothering you. Why don’t we get it cut?”

“Your Highness, you cannot focus on your studies with your hair looking like *that*!”

No matter what she did, her hair continued to be a source of bother. Though it wasn’t so much her hair itself that was the problem; it was all the snide comments and teasing that everyone—her teachers, her attendant, the other noble children—continually subjected her to that weighed heavily on her mind, and she found herself unable to focus on anything. And to make matters worse, her half-sister, Patricia, who was eight months younger than Shessfelia, was not only better than her at *everything*, she also had beautiful silky hair, which invited more ridicule from others who compared the two. She couldn’t take it anymore, and one day, she ran off in the middle of a dance lesson. Shiro came to find her, however.

“How about, starting tomorrow, you practice your dancing with me instead?” he had suggested, and in that moment, Shessfelia had felt incredibly happy.

In the royal palace, everyone always made fun of her hair. The only people who didn’t ridicule her were her parents and her personal knight, Luza. Everyone else either looked at her with disgust in their eyes or gossiped about her behind her back. But Shiro and Aina were different. They hadn’t made a single comment about her hair. The two of them saved Shessfelia from her despair.

“Here’s your dress for the ball, Shess.”

The gown Shiro had brought her was all shiny and sparkly. In fact, it was so beautiful, Shessfelia was certain there wasn’t another princess on the entire continent who had ever worn something so magnificent. But she couldn’t wear it. Such a beautiful dress would be wasted on her, with her frizzy, unruly hair.

“This dress...” she had said. “I don’t look good in it.”

“What do you mean? You look totally *adorable*! I really, really mean that,” Shiro had responded.

“No, I don’t!” she had clapped back. “It doesn’t suit me!”

That was why Shessfelia was so vehemently refusing to wear the dress Shiro had produced for her.

Chapter Seventeen: Shiro the Magician

Once Shess had finished her tale, Aina whispered “Shess...” but her breath caught in her throat.

“Princess...” Luza said sympathetically at almost the exact same time.

Both were unable to find any words that might comfort the little girl. If Shess hadn’t been born into the royal family, no one would have cared about her hair being frizzy, nor that it didn’t match either of her parents’. Even so, the little girl had been willing to put up with the endless ridicule and derision as long as she was the sole target of the jibes. But Queen Eleene had started false rumors about Shess’s beloved mother, Queen Anielka, being unfaithful to the king, and all of a sudden, her mother found herself in the line of fire too. And it was all because of her. For a little while, the only sound in the room was that of Shess weeping.

“You’ve endured all of that for so long, haven’t you, Shess?” I said tenderly, placing my hand on the little girl’s head and gently stroking her hair.

At any other time, she would probably have swatted my hand away with a dismissive, “What do you *think* you’re doing?” But that day was different. She let me comfort her without any resistance, to the point where she even jumped into my arms and started sobbing even louder. I was slightly taken aback by this display of familiarity, but I swiftly regained my composure and softly rubbed her back.

“You must be really frustrated, huh?” I said. “I can tell. Just from hearing your story, I’m beyond frustrated too. In fact, I’m angry. *Really* angry.”

She nodded ever so slightly, then sniffed a staccato “Amata” between sobs as she wrapped her little arms around me. At first, the hug was hesitant, as if she was testing the waters, but gradually, she squeezed me tighter and tighter. It was like she was a very young child unaccustomed to receiving affection.

“I’m so darn frustrated by it. I can’t even begin to imagine how *you* must feel after enduring all that mocking over so many years,” I continued.

She nodded again.

“Hey, Shess. I’ve got an idea,” I said to the little girl.

She made a quizzical noise and looked up at me, her cheeks wet with tears. I produced a handkerchief from my pocket and gently wiped her face.

“At the ball, we’re gonna show all of those idiots who made fun of you just how dead wrong they were.”

“But how? My hair’s still...” Shess started to argue, but I interrupted her.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got just the thing.”

“Huh?”

The little girl blinked at me in confusion, and I flashed her a self-confident smile.

“I’m no wizard, but I can use a *teeny* tiny bit of magic,” I said mysteriously.

Shess simply stared at me in disbelief, utterly confused about what I could possibly have in mind.

Chapter Eighteen: The Ball

The day of the ball finally arrived. Aina and I were granted entry—me as the merchant responsible for procuring Shess’s dress, and Aina as both my assistant and Shess’s friend. Queen Anielka had wanted to extend an invitation to Zidan too, but as he was a birdman, his presence wouldn’t have been permitted at the ball whether he had an invite or not. Not that Zidan minded, though. In fact, he had seemed rather relieved that he was skipping the ball.

“Mister Shiro,” Aina whispered to me once we were inside.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Isn’t that the man who threatened you?” she said, looking across the room at one specific individual.

I followed her gaze, and sure enough, there was Bart, chatting away with the second queen consort.

“Queen Eleene, you look exceedingly beautiful today,” Bart fawned with a nasal chuckle.

“Why, thank you, Bart. This dress you procured for me is simply marvelous. It really enhances my natural beauty, don’t you think?” Queen Eleene replied, her voice dripping with self-satisfaction.

Bart gasped with no small amount of exaggeration. “Did I really furnish you with that dress? Please accept my deepest apologies. Your radiance eclipsed the dress entirely, chasing away all memory of it from my mind!”

The pair really did look like villains in a movie. As Aina and I stared at the two of them from afar, Queen Eleene suddenly noticed our presence and turned toward us.

“Oh, my!” she gasped in an affected manner before striding briskly and resolutely over to us. “So you came too, barbarian—ah, I mean, my dear friend from the countryside,” she said.

Good evening, Your Majesty. Yes, it is I, the barbarian from the countryside, I almost replied, but I checked myself at the last second.

“Queen Eleene, what a pleasure,” I said instead, kneeling down in front of her like the plebeian I was, while beside me, Aina lifted the hem of her skirt and executed a perfect curtsy. “Queen Anielka invited us to the ball,” I added to explain our attendance.

The second queen consort let out an exasperated sigh. “My dear sister really does just do whatever she wants, doesn’t she? I cannot believe she invited a grubby merchant like yourself to this royal ball.”

We hadn't even been conversing for five minutes and the verbal onslaught had already begun. Heck, the ball hadn't even started yet.

"Speaking of which, I hear you have produced a wonderful dress for Shessfelia, out-of-towner," Queen Eleene continued.

"Thank you for the compliment," I said.

"And what's more, you took it upon yourself to teach her how to dance!"

"Oh, I didn't do much, really," I said. "It was all Her Highness."

"I was so happy to hear that Shessfelia had finally learned how to dance!" the second queen consort said, though I must have made a face at this without thinking, because she added, "What's with *that* expression? I was! I was *truly* happy for Shessfelia. So much so, in fact, my entire body trembled with joy." There was a suspicious glint in her eyes as she glowered at Aina and me.

Are you sure you were trembling because you were happy and not because you were angry? I thought to myself. I could sense Aina trying to make herself as small as possible beside me, as if hoping to evade the intensity of the second queen consort's glare. Meanwhile, Bart—who hadn't moved from his spot—was regarding us with a smirk on his face.

After a few awkward seconds of silence, the second queen consort let out a chuckle. "Oh, but what a shame it is. However beautiful the dress you procured is, it will be completely wasted on Shessfelia. I have to say, I do feel rather sorry for you."

"Um, might I ask what you mean by that?" I said.

"My, my. Don't tell me you really don't understand? Or perhaps you *do* understand and you're simply playing dumb," the second queen consort said.

Her words hung in the air as she paused, a malicious smirk spreading across her features.

"Shessfelia can wear whatever dress she wants, but with that unruly mane of hers, she will just look ridiculous, no matter the outfit. In fact, the more elegant the dress, the more the absurdity of her wearing it is accentuated! Oh, but wait! Maybe you already knew that and furnished her with that beautiful gown for your own personal amusement? Yes, that makes more sense. I must say, you are far more ill-natured than I thought, out-of-towner," the second queen consort said. She concluded her monologue with an arrogant laugh, then left us alone, obviously deeming that our exchange had reached its conclusion.

I exhaled the breath I'd been holding and shot Aina a sideways glance. The poor thing was white as a sheet. Being confronted by a woman as evil as the second queen consort must have been a very traumatic experience for an innocent eight-year-old from the

countryside like her. In truth, it really wasn't all that surprising Shess had a rebellious streak a mile wide, considering the nasty comments that had been thrown in her direction ever since she was little. Though, unlike a certain second queen consort, Shess wasn't rotten to the core.

"She's gone, Aina. There's no need to be scared anymore," I said, comforting the little girl.

"Y-Yeah..." came her response.

As one, the two of us breathed a sigh of relief and sat down. Almost as soon as we'd done so, a man entered the room to proclaim the commencement of the ball. The orchestra started playing, and all the young boys and girls in the room started fidgeting, but no one started dancing just yet. The stars of the day hadn't arrived, after all.

"Oh, right. The princesses are supposed to take to the dance floor first, aren't they?" I muttered to no one in particular.

First, the guests of honor—the two princesses—would make their grand entrances, then the boys in the room would ask them to dance. Once the princesses had chosen a partner, they would then start dancing under the watchful gaze of the crowd, and it was only after this first dance was over that the other guests would start dancing themselves. Luza was the one who had filled me in on all of that.

By the time I was done remembering everything she'd told me, the middle-aged master of ceremonies announced, "Her Highness, Princess Patricia Primel Giruam!"

The grand doors opened and a little girl wearing an emerald-green gown gracefully entered the room, prompting a chorus of oohs and aahs.

"Her Highness is becoming more and more beautiful with each passing year!"

"She radiates an intelligence that belies her young age, as you would expect of Duke Huppert's granddaughter!"

"Her hair is so *beautiful*! It's just like His Majesty's. Even the goddesses themselves must be jealous of it!"

Everyone in the room was extremely complimentary of the princess and her dress, though whether it was all genuine admiration or mere flattery to curry favor with the second queen consort was difficult to say.

"Well, look at you, Patricia! You look resplendent!" Queen Eleene chimed in, her delight evident.

Well, well. It seems she can sound affectionate when she wants to, I thought.

Princess Patricia made her way to the middle of the ballroom, clutched the hem of her skirt with both hands, then bent her knees and executed an elegant curtsy, which drew thunderous applause from

the assembled guests.

“Princess Patricia, might I have the honor of being your dance partner?” asked a boy who looked like he was in his teens as the applause began to wane.

“No, pick me!” another piped up.

“Please dance with me, Your Highness!” said a third.

A bunch of handsome boys and young men had started quarreling over who would get the first dance with Princess Patricia, and it felt a bit like I was at an idol’s autograph session. Their ages were all over the place too, ranging from very young children to grown men who looked like they were in their early twenties. Many of them most likely viewed this as a golden opportunity to secure a place in the royal family, and while it was undoubtedly a long shot, there was no harm in trying, right? Princess Patricia’s popularity was undeniable, and she quickly found herself encircled by admirers, all lavishing her with praise. Queen Eleene was jubilant, and Bart seemed very satisfied with the crowd’s response to the dress he had furnished the young princess with.

“Quiet! Quiet, everyone! Her Highness, Princess Shessfelia is about to make her entrance! Silence, please!” the master of ceremonies bellowed in an attempt to hush the chatter.

The room instantly fell silent and displeased expressions appeared on the faces of the guests. No words were uttered, but it was easy to tell they were all thinking the same thing: *Oh, right. This is her ball too, isn’t it?* If this had been a manga, the word “silence” would have been floating above their heads in big, fat letters right at that moment.

After a few seconds, though, a man chuckled softly. “Oh, I’d completely forgotten about her.”

“Princess Shessfelia, huh? I hear she has hair like the mane of a wild beast.”

“Well, I hear her temperament is as wild as her hair. A beast in every sense!”

Snickering rippled around the room as people started openly mocking Shess. I glanced over at Queen Anielka and noticed her fists were clenched in frustration. In fact, I was pretty sure the red stains I could see on the palms of her gloves weren’t just my imagination, suggesting that she was clenching her fists so tightly, her nails were digging into her skin and drawing blood. She must have felt incredibly frustrated at her own powerlessness in this situation, while also feeling sorry for her daughter for cursing her with frizzy hair.

“Her Highness, Princess Shessfelia Shussel Giruam!” the master of ceremonies announced, and the room fell silent once more, though most of those in attendance looked thoroughly uninterested. A few had wicked smirks on their faces because they were already planning

how they were going to ridicule Shess when she entered.

Then at last, the doors swung open, and with her shoes click-clacking on the floor, Shess made her grand entrance and walked toward the center of the room. As soon as the waiting crowd laid eyes on her, everyone gasped in shock. Shess paid no attention to the stunned reaction as—like her half-sister before her—she clutched the hem of her skirt and bent her knees to curtsy. Everyone was riveted by the sight of this beautiful little girl standing in the middle of the room.

“Is that really Princess Shessfelia?” someone gasped.

“H-Her hair...” another uttered. “Why is it...”

“Which idiot likened her hair to the mane of a wild beast? Look at her! Her hair is beautiful!”

Everyone in the room was gawking at Shess, stunned by her beauty, particularly her gorgeous long, straight hair.

“You did it, Shess,” I mumbled quietly, though I was nowhere near close enough to the little girl for her to hear me. “You’ve surprised everyone.”

“Mister Shiro, Shess looks really cute!” Aina chirruped.

I nodded with a smile. “Yeah, she does.”

“She looks just like a princess,” Aina breathed in amazement.

I couldn’t help chuckling at that. “She is a princess, Aina.”

Not a single person in the room could take their eyes off Shess, and that included me and Aina.

“Your magic is really amazing, Mister Shiro!” Aina said.

“Thanks. It took me a while to learn the art of hair straightening.”

Yup, that’s right. The “spell” I’d used to make Shess’s hair all smooth and flowy was regular old hair straightening. With the right tools and a little bit of know-how, it was possible to turn even the most stubborn and frizziest locks into beautiful, straight tresses, which is exactly what I did to Shess’s hair. But learning how to do it properly was no walk in the park, let me tell you. First, I had to hit up a specialized store to get all the right products and a hair straightener, then I asked Shiori to teach me the proper technique. Once I’d gotten a grasp on what I needed to do, it was time for some hands-on practice. I tried it out on myself while Shiori gave me some pointers from the sidelines, before moving on to doing grandma’s hair, and finally, Shiori’s. Several long hours of practice later, I was starting to get some decent results.

When the day of the ball arrived, I headed over to the royal palace with all of my tools and began the long, arduous task of straightening Shess’s hair. Then, when I was done, I couldn’t stop myself from punching the air in triumph. Shess’s hair was all smooth and flowy by this point, but I wasn’t done yet. I’d heard that in noble circles, longer hair was considered more beautiful, so I’d also bought some hair

extensions and learned how to clip them on like a pro. *Never in my life did I think I'd become a hairdresser one day. Oh well.*

Seeing Shess with her gorgeous, long, cascading hair, I couldn't help but be impressed by how regal she looked. I was really glad I'd put in all of those hours learning how to style hair.

"Do you remember the face she made when she saw herself in the mirror once I was done straightening her hair this morning? It was so funny, wasn't it?" I said to Aina.

"It was! She was so surprised and kept asking if it was really her hair!" the little girl giggled.

From the moment she'd entered the room, an air of self-assurance radiated from Shess. She simply exuded confidence, and there was an unmistakable grace about her every movement. The rebellious little girl who had been scared of people gossiping behind her back was nowhere to be seen.

"Princess Shessfelia! Please... Please dance with me!" a teenage boy cried out, seemingly unable to contain his excitement any longer.

And from that point on, all hell broke loose.

"My name is Remilio San Malforth. Would you please grant me the honor of this dance?"

"M-Marry me!"

"I may not be young anymore, but I *am* still single..."

"You can have all of my worldly possessions! Just please, grant me your love, princess!"

Impressed not only by Shess's dress and smooth, flowing hair but also by her dignified, regal manner, men of all ages vied for the privilege of dancing with her. The boldest among them even went as far as asking for her hand in marriage there and then, and I definitely spotted at least one or two men who were north of sixty in the throng surrounding her. And what a throng it was! There were more people encircling Shess than Princess Patricia, and it was obvious to everyone which young princess was the more popular at that particular moment in time. No matter how much power Queen Eleene wielded, once people caught a glimpse of true beauty, they couldn't help but follow their hearts.

"Mister Shiro?" Aina said to grab my attention.

"Yes?"

"Who do you think Shess will dance with?" she asked.

"That's a good question. She doesn't strike me as the type who really cares about her partner's social standing, so she'll probably just choose whoever she finds the most handsome," I said.

"That makes sense," the little girl said with a nod. "I can't wait to see her dance!"

While Aina and I were busy discussing who Shess would pick to

be her partner for the first dance, I suddenly heard the unmistakable click-clack of shoes on the hard ballroom floor. It sounded like someone was walking toward us.

“Amata!”

I turned my head and found Shess standing in front of me, her face as red as a tomato.

“Shess—uh, I mean, Princess Shessfelia. Is something the matter? Oh, is there something wrong with your dress, maybe?”

The cosplay outfit Shess was wearing may have cost me five million yen, but at the end of the day, it was still tailored, so maybe one of the cosplay store’s employees had made a mistake while sewing it.

But Shess shook her head. “N-No, the dress is perfect. That’s not why I’ve come over here. I-I...” She trailed off, then let out a little “Humph!” and thrust a hand out toward me.

“Huh?” I mumbled, confused by her actions.

“Humph!” she repeated.

“Uh, do you want me to shake your hand?” I asked tentatively.

“No! I’m...” she hesitated. “I’m telling you to dance with me!”

I was so taken aback, the only thing that managed to escape my lips was a high-pitched, “Excuse me?”

“Come on, come on! Dance with me. That’s an order!” Shess said, her face getting redder by the second as she continued to hold her hand out toward me.

“But I’m just a *merchant*!” I protested. “I shouldn’t even be here in the first place! I can’t go and steal a nobleman’s place and dance with you as well!”

“I-I *want* to dance with you, Amata! Seriously, why’d you have to make me say it out loud?” Shess said sullenly, though this time, she didn’t haughtily turn her head away from me like usual. Her gaze was firmly fixed on me and her hand remained held out toward me. I figured this must be her way of showing her gratitude to me.

“Well, all right, then,” I said, clasping her hand in mine and kneeling. “Princess Shessfelia, please will you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

The corners of Shess’s mouth curled up. “Sure! Come on, let’s dance!”

I stood up and followed Shess to the middle of the room, her little hand in mine. Queen Anielka made a gesture to the orchestra, who swiftly transitioned into the piece of music we’d been practicing our dancing to for the past week.

“Don’t step on my feet, you hear?” Shess said, throwing an accusatory glare at me.

“I’ll try not to.”

Ignoring the jealous glares from the men around us, I started dancing with Shess. Step, step, *turn*. Shess danced beautifully, and it took everything I had to keep up with her. At the refrain, Shess expertly executed a turn, while I mirrored it a few beats later. Then we pulled toward each other once more, with Shess placing a hand on my hip. It was the closest we had stood to one another throughout the entire dance.

“Thank you, Amata,” the little girl said quietly.

And with that, the first dance came to an end, and the ball began for real.

Shess’s society debut had been a resounding success.



Chapter Nineteen: Revenge

“So the little princess made a big impression at the ball, huh?” Zidan remarked once Aina and I had finished recounting the previous day’s events to him.

The three of us were making our way over to the royal palace, and while it was still fairly early in the morning, the streets were already lively and packed with people, which meant our progress was slow.

“She really did. I wish you could’ve seen her too. Right, Aina?”

“Yeah! Shess absolutely sparkled!”

“You’re making me regret not being there even more!” Zidan said. “But I bet the ball was full of nobles, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it was held at the royal palace, after all. The only non-nobles there were Aina and me...” I paused and corrected myself. “Oh, and Bart.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “I could never spend an entire evening surrounded by nobles! I’d be so scared of messing up, I think my heart would stop!”

I laughed. “I don’t blame you.”

The ball had been a huge success. Queen Anielka had almost shed a tear on seeing her daughter looking so regal, and she wasn’t alone in that, for the king had also looked incredibly moved. Though it must be noted that the atmosphere in the ballroom had turned a *little* sour when Shess picked me as her partner for the first dance.

“Shess looked so pretty,” Aina said, a dreamy expression on her face.

“Didn’t she just? She looked like a totally different person.”

“Yeah!” the little girl agreed. “She was a real princess last night.”

The night before had left such an impression on both Aina and me, we just couldn’t stop talking about Shess.

“She looked really cool,” I added.

Aina nodded enthusiastically. “You looked cool too, Mister Shiro! When you and Shess danced together, I mean.”

“Did I?” I asked.

“Yeah, you did!”

“You danced at the ball, Shiro?” Zidan asked, his curiosity piqued.

I let out an embarrassed chuckle. “Well, a lot happened last night...”

All evening long, Shess had been showered with requests to dance,

and judging by the scary expression on the second queen consort's face for most of the night, it was evident that I had succeeded in making Shess the belle of the ball.

"Thank goodness Shess taught me how to dance," I reflected. "I would've made a total fool of myself if she hadn't."

Aina giggled. "You didn't manage to dance with Miss Luza a single time, did you?"

"Nope. She kept telling me if I wanted to touch her hand, I had to propose to her first. I tried everything I could to convince her, but she wouldn't hear it," I sighed.

The three of us continued to chitchat about the ball as we headed for the royal palace, but just as we reached an intersection on the way out of the commercial district, we heard a voice off to our left.

"Hey, you three. Hold up a second, will ya?"

I turned my head in the direction the voice had come from and saw a group of thugs standing there. *Oh boy. We're about to get shaken down, aren't we?*

"Zidan, Aina, just keep walking," I instructed my companions.

"Right," the birdman said with a nod.

"O-Okay," Aina stammered.

We walked past the thugs without even casting another glance in their direction, but to my dismay, a second bunch of ruffians appeared a little farther down the road, blocking our way.

"This way, Aina," I said as I grabbed the little girl's hand and took the next right, only to be confronted by another group of thugs.

As a last resort, I spun around to go the other way, but surprise, surprise, there were more thugs waiting for us there too.

"Of freaking course," I grumbled.

We were surrounded. There were about twenty thugs in all, and each one was eyeing us with an unpleasant smirk on their face.

"You sure we got the right guys?" one of them said, turning to an accomplice.

"Positive. A birdman and a hume wearing weird clothes. Just like the boss said."

The first thug laughed. "So we can beat these guys up to our heart's content, right?"

"Don't kill 'em just yet. The boss said he wants to finish 'em off himself."

"We gotta squeeze every last coin out of the merchant first too," the first thug said, his smirk widening.

Judging from their conversation, these thugs had been hired to eliminate us, and there was about a ninety percent probability that they were Bart's goons.

"All right, then," one of the thugs said, stepping forward. He

looked like the kind of guy who resolved all of his problems with violence. "Our boss wants to see ya. Yer gonna hafta come with us."

Beside me, Aina was quivering from head to toe, and she squeezed my hand tightly. I squeezed back, then addressed the thug, my tone firm. "Listen, I don't know who your boss is, but if he has some kind of business with us, he should come and find us himself."

The thug made an amused noise. "Ya sure talk big for a guy with scrawny arms. I thought merchants were s'posed to be good at countin'. Can't ya tell there's more of us than you?" he said, drawing laughs from his fellow ruffians. "Well, if ya don't wanna come voluntarily, that's fine with me. I don't mind draggin' ya there. Ready, guys?"

"Yeah!" was the collective response.

On the man's signal, the other thugs all pulled out knives and daggers, and started slowly advancing on us.

"The boss said we ain't allowed to kill ya, but he didn't say nothin' 'bout not givin' ya a good workin' over. It ain't like ya need *all* those fingers to keep on livin', right? Come to think of it, ya don't even really need arms or legs, do ya?" the leader of the thugs said.

"I see. So since we won't come with you, you feel the need to resort to violence, is that right?" I said calmly.

The man shrugged. "Sorry, but it's how I've done things my whole life. Like I said, I don't care if ya come with us willingly or not. Though if I were you, I'd go with the first option."

One of the thugs cackled. "Even if they do, we're still gonna beat 'em up later!"

"Shut yer trap, ya lunk," the leader of the thugs spat. "Ya gonna make 'em freak out."

"Well, the boss is gonna kill 'em anyway, so who cares? They're dead meat either way," the second thug retorted, and the whole gang burst into laughter.

Looks like these guys aren't going to back off. Well, if they're so set on beating us up, I guess there's no need for us to hold back either. Come forth, O legendary fairy!

I turned to Aina's bag and yelled, "Hey, it's your time to shine, bo—" but was interrupted by a sudden barrage of lightning bolts that arced down from the sky and struck the thugs.

"Foolish humes!" a female voice bellowed.

As one, the thugs screamed in pain before collapsing to the ground and lying there motionless. That single attack had been enough to incapacitate all twenty of them. Their eyes had rolled back into their heads and they were all frothing at the mouth, but I was pretty sure they weren't dead. Well, at least I hoped they weren't.

"Are you all right, master?" Dramom asked as she descended from

the sky with Suama cradled to her chest.

So it was Dramom who had unleashed that powerful attack. Though not everyone was happy about this turn of events.

“H-Hey, Dramom! What are *you* doing here? I was about to make mincemeat of those guys!” Patty protested, frustrated her thunder had been stolen, especially as this was the second time she had been beaten to the punch since arriving in the royal capital. The first time was when Shess had rescued herself from the thugs trying to kidnap her before Patty could get involved.

Having flown out of Aina’s bag, the little fairy was now hovering in front of Dramom’s face with her hands on her hips to show her displeasure.

“Shiro said *I* was the one who was meant to protect him and Aina!” she pouted.

“She’s right,” I interjected. “I’m really thankful for your help, Dramom, but what are you even doing here?”

“I apologize for disobeying your commands, master. However, the inn was attacked, so I came to find you,” Dramom explained.

“The inn was attacked?!” I blurted out, before hurriedly asking, “Wait, are the assailants okay?”

On hearing my question, Zidan almost fell over. “Shiro, you’re worrying about the wrong people.”

“No, I’m seriously not. You have no idea how strong Dramom and Celes really are, Zidan. The people who attacked the inn are probably all dead!” I said.

“Please do not worry, master. The demon and I did not *completely* obliterate those fools,” Dramom replied simply.

“Are you telling the truth?” I said, my eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Well, about five of them were on the verge of passing on, but I used my powers to heal them before they could succumb to their injuries. None of them died, I promise.”

So the Thunderbird’s Roost had been attacked, huh? According to Dramom, mere minutes earlier, several dozen thugs had raided the inn in order to capture Dramom, Celes, and Suama. I figured the reason for this seemingly high number of assailants must have been due to how large the Thunderbird’s Roost was, owing to the fact that it was a luxury inn. The thugs had successfully managed to make their way into the suite we were staying in on the top floor, and they must have thought they’d snagged themselves a real easy gig, but little did they know that the three people they were brandishing knives at weren’t regular humes. Whoever the mastermind behind all of this was—Bart, most likely—they must have come up with the idea of abducting my friends to put the squeeze on me. Well, unfortunately for the goons,

they had all gotten stomped into the dirt.

"The demon took care of those lowlifes, then I hurried to find you, master. I could not shake the feeling that something might have happened to you," Dramom said.

"I see. Thank you for your concern," I replied. "Where's Celes now, though?"

"She is currently interrogating the fools who attacked the inn in the hope that they will tell us the name of the person who hired them," she explained.

The thugs in question most likely worked for an underground guild. As for Celes's interrogation methods... Well, let's just say that I really hoped our suite and the rest of the inn hadn't turned into a bloodbath.

"Ain-ya!" Suama squealed as she toddled up to Aina.

"Little Su!" Aina exclaimed, picking the little dragon girl up and giving her a squeeze. While it was true that Patty had been here and would have saved us from those thugs if a certain dragon hadn't intervened, poor little Aina must have been incredibly scared all the same. In fact, it looked like she was still shaking like a leaf.

Now that I was sure everyone was fine, it was time to deal with the aftermath of Dramom's devastating attack. She glanced around at the thugs passed out on the ground.

"Master, where would you like me to dispose of these ruffians?" she asked, her words dripping with disgust, almost as if she were referring to bags of trash. "If you will allow me, I can obliterate these wretches in an instant."

"Could you please stop talking about obliterating people?" I grumbled.

"As you wish. Though I do think it is a bit of a shame that you will not allow me to do so," Dramom sighed. Her devotion to me was so strong, she was ready to basically reduce to ash anyone who tried to attack me.

"Still, these guys are criminals," I conceded. "I say we hand them over to..."

"Amataaaa!"

"...the guards," I said, finishing up my sentence before noticing the newcomer. "Huh? Luza?"

"Amataaaaaa!"

Oh, great. Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

I turned, and sure enough, Luza was sprinting toward us. Aina quickly opened her backpack and Patty dove straight into it without a second's hesitation. Good. That meant I could focus on dealing with Luza.

"Amataaaa!" she yelled, not slowing at all.

I didn't think much of her running up to us and calling out my name like this at first, but as she got closer, I felt my blood run cold.

"Amata!" she repeated, gasping and panting as she finally reached us. "There you are!"

"Huh? Hold on a second, Miss Luza. Are you all right? You're bleeding!" I said, panicking.

There was blood all over her clothes, with her right shoulder in particular absolutely caked in it. She must have sustained a pretty serious wound.

"I'll explain later. Right now, I need you to help me," she said.

"To help you? Has Shess run away again?"

But Luza shook her head. "No, she hasn't." She paused, then said bitterly, "She's been abducted."



"Shess has been abducted?!"

Luza nodded, a grave look on her face. "It all happened so fast," she said while Dramom healed her wounds. "I spied Her Highness slipping out of the palace to go visit the orphans in the non-hume district again and decided to follow her at a distance. But then suddenly, this group of shady-looking men appeared, and they just..." Luza trailed off. She didn't need to finish the sentence for us to understand what had happened next, though once she had regained her composure, she gave us the blow-by-blow.

Shess had been in a very good mood that morning—likely due to her successful society debut the evening before—and she was all smiles when she went to steal food from the kitchen before slipping out of the palace. But as soon as she set foot in the non-hume district, a group of men wearing black from head to toe suddenly swarmed around her. Fearing for the princess's safety, Luza had immediately drawn her sword and started slashing away at the men. She had no time to question the men's intentions. She just knew Shess could be in danger, and she had to save her.

She dispatched two and was about to land the finishing blow on a third when she was attacked from behind. The man she had been skirmishing with up to that point was a skilled swordsman and he had taken the opportunity to thrust his blade into her right shoulder. Even so, Luza had fought on through the pain, but the men had the advantage of numbers, and in the end, all she could do was watch on as they dragged Shess away, powerless to do anything about it.

"I caught a glimpse of the princess and saw that she was unconscious. I assume among their number, they must have had a mage who I guess cast a sleeping spell on her." Luza paused as she bit her lip in frustration. "I'm begging you, Amata. Please help me find

the princess.”

She grabbed my hands and bowed deeply. Yup, that’s right. The same Luza who had told me I couldn’t touch her at all unless we were engaged was clasping my hands.

I nodded firmly. “Of course I will. But why didn’t you tell the palace guards about—oh, wait! Don’t tell me you haven’t told them because you’re afraid you’ll get fired?”

“What kind of idiot do you take me for?” Luza huffed, glaring at me. “That’s not why at all. Think about it. The princess got abducted the day after the ball. These guys targeted her from the outset. That means there must be someone lurking in the shadows, pulling the strings.”

Her face was a picture of seriousness, which told me she really had thought it through and wasn’t just trying to save her own skin.

“And you’re saying that as long as this person isn’t behind bars, we can’t trust the palace’s guards,” I summarized.

She nodded. “Exactly.”

“Makes sense. I haven’t told you this yet, but I was actually just attacked by a group of thugs too. And not just me. My friends at the inn had to face a similar threat at almost exactly the same time.”

“What?!” Luza exclaimed, gawking at me. “They came after you too?!”

“Yup. Though, thankfully, my friends managed to repel them.”

A smug aura emanated from Dramom when I said this, though her expression didn’t change at all and she still looked perfectly calm and collected as she used her magic to heal Luza’s wounds.

“The inn, me, and Shess. They attacked us in three different places at the same time. The only person with the means to pull off an elaborate strategy like that...”

“...is Bart,” Zidan said, finishing my sentence for me.

“Most likely,” Luza said with a nod. “And Queen Eleene must be the one who gave the order.”

“But Shess is the princess of the kingdom!” I said. “Why would she —”

“I’m positive she’s behind this,” Luza interrupted me.

I was speechless. I’d guessed Queen Eleene was evil, but I was finally witnessing the true depths of her malevolence.

“Queen Eleene ordered that merchant, Bart, to abduct Shess,” Luza said, spitting out the man’s name as if it were poison in her mouth. “I’ve heard he has ties to underground guilds, so that must be why she picked him to carry out her cruel plan.”

“That would mean we’re not just dealing with the second queen consort, but with those underground guilds as well,” I pointed out.

Luza nodded. “It does.”

“Okay, I understand the situation,” I said. “We have no time to waste. Let’s go rescue Shess.”

Luza’s expression softened on hearing me say this. “Shiro...” she uttered. “You have my thanks.”

About five minutes later, Celes joined us after successfully squeezing every bit of information she could out of the thugs who had attacked the inn.

Intermission

Shessfelia woke up shivering.

"Where am I?" she mumbled.

She was lying on the floor in a dimly lit, unfamiliar room, and as her senses returned, she noted the air was musty and the ceiling above her was littered with cobwebs. The little girl trawled through her memories, trying to work out how exactly she had ended up in this place, but the last thing she remembered was entering the non-hume district and...

Oh, I remember now.

A bunch of men dressed in black had suddenly jumped out and attacked her. She hadn't even had time to scream for help before one of the men chanted some kind of mysterious incantation and her vision went blurry. She'd lost consciousness, and when she came to again, she'd found herself in this room.

"Achoo!"

She was so cold in here she couldn't help sneezing, her whole body shaking like a leaf. She looked down at herself and saw she had been stripped of all of her clothes apart from her chemise. Her hands were also bound, which at last brought her to the conclusion that she'd been kidnapped.

"Oh, so you're finally awake," a familiar voice said.

Shessfelia didn't even need to see the person's face to know who had just spoken. The little girl raised her head and cast the most venomous glare she could muster up at the fancily dressed woman who looked incredibly out of place in this shabby, dust-filled room.

"Well, hello. How is everything, Shessfelia? It is such a shame that things have come to this. A real pity indeed."

"Other-mother Eleene."

That's right. The woman who had kidnapped her was none other than the second queen consort of the Giruam Kingdom, Queen Eleene.

"Oh, my poor little Shessfelia! Why did this have to happen to you?" Queen Eleene lamented dramatically, even though she was the one who had done this to her. She threw a look of mock pity at the little girl.

"Let me go," Shessfelia said through gritted teeth.

"My, my, Shessfelia. Is that really the way a princess should speak?" Queen Eleene taunted. "You should remember your manners

and say 'please.' Do you understand?"

Her heels click-clacked across the floor as she came to stand in front of the little girl. A shiver ran up Shessfelia's spine when she saw the lurid expression on the second queen consort's face.

"At least *try* to behave in a way that is befitting of your rank in your final moments."

There was a mad glint in Queen Eleene's eyes, and Shessfelia noticed she was holding a dagger in her right hand.

"You have always been a problem child. You could have simply acted like the beast princess you truly are, but you just *had* to go and steal the spotlight from Patricia, didn't you?" Eleene said, her expression dark as she grabbed hold of Shessfelia's hair. The hair Shiro had worked so hard to make look beautiful. The hair that had given her so much pride and confidence.

"What happened to your hair, anyway? Such beautiful flowing locks don't suit a beast princess like you! And yet..." Queen Eleene paused, then repeated, "And yet..." but she didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she made a motion with the dagger and Shessfelia could only watch helplessly as a sizable chunk of her hair fell to the dusty floorboards.

"My hair!" the little girl cried out, and in a rush of blood to the head, she glared defiantly at Eleene and bellowed, "What are you *doing*?!"

"Silence!" Eleene yelled, slapping the little girl across the face, causing blood to pearl at the corner of her mouth. "Who do you think you're talking to?" she seethed. "You can put on a pretty dress and magically change your hair, but at the end of the day, you're still a beast princess! You're just like all those disgusting demi-humes!"

Shessfelia didn't say a word, but her glare grew fiercer.

"And don't you dare look at me like that! You receive one compliment from His Majesty, and all of a sudden, you're strutting around like you're the most distinguished person in the kingdom!" Eleene spat as she grabbed another handful of the little girl's hair and forced her to look up. Her grip was so strong, Shessfelia could hear some of the strands snapping under the strain.

"Look over there, Shessfelia! That's the dress you were wearing yesterday. I added my own *personal* touch to it."

Eleene turned her head and gestured toward a man who was clad all in black and who seemed to have been standing there in the background this whole time. He nodded on cue and unfolded the lump of fabric he was carrying in his arms.

"What do you think? Isn't it even *more* beautiful now?" Eleene asked, a broad grin on her face.

A gasp escaped Shessfelia's lips. The little girl was at a total loss

for words. The beautiful, sparkly dress Shiro had furnished her with was nothing more than a torn, shabby rag.

“M-My...” she stammered as her vision went blurry. “My dress...”

Shessfelia was used to the kind of abuse the second queen consort liked to dish out. She could endure the snide comments, being stripped down to her underwear, and having her hair cut. But seeing her beautiful dress in that state was too much for the little girl, and she couldn’t hold back her tears. When she had put that dress on, both her first-ever friend and her beloved mother had paid her compliments, calling her “pretty” and “cute.”

Amata made that dress for me...

The young princess held her bound hands out toward her tattered dress, but Eleene still had hold of her hair, so no matter how hard she tried to reach for it, she couldn’t touch the ruined dress.

“Yes, Shessfelia, yes! That’s the expression that suits you best!” Eleene exclaimed, rejoicing at the sight of the little girl’s tears. “I’ve always *wanted* to see you make a face like that! You look so beautiful, Shessfelia! Seeing your crying face brings me so much joy!”

Her breathing erratic, Eleene leaned in close to Shessfelia and locked eyes with her. “I was planning on making you take a long, *long* sleep here, but I’ve had a change of heart,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “Shessfelia, I want you to leave the palace and join a temple. If you vow to dedicate the rest of your life to worshipping the gods, I’ll spare you. *Just* you, though.”

“Just...” Shessfelia said, her voice trembling. “Just me?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Just you. That merchant who gave you that dress and his little assistant will already have departed from this world by now,” Eleene explained, drawing a horrified gasp from Shessfelia. “Bart informed me that he would have them dealt with in the most dreadful of ways, either by drowning them in the river, burning them to death, or burying them alive. A most tragic affair indeed. That merchant and that poor little girl have lost their lives because of you. If they hadn’t crossed paths with you, they never would have met such a cruel fate. How brutal! How pitiable!” Eleene’s wide grin contrasted starkly with her words.

“You...” Shessfelia saw red. “You loathsome woman!” she screamed as she hurled herself at the second queen consort and made her fall to the ground, where the little girl pummeled the grown woman with her bound hands. “You’ll pay for this! I swear you’ll pay for this!”

Eleene gritted her teeth. “Stop that right this instant!”

One of the men in black kicked Shessfelia off the fallen woman so hard, the little girl went flying and crashed into the wall.

“You’ll pay for this...” Shessfelia rasped, her back up against the

wall.

“No, no, *you* will,” Eleene retorted as the man in black helped her up. “And here I was, willing to let you live! Beasts like you don’t have an ounce of gratitude in your bodies.”

Shessfelia’s whole body was screaming in pain, but that didn’t stop her glaring at Eleene for a single second. *If looks could kill...* the little girl thought, cursing the fact that she hadn’t been born with demonic eyes with that kind of power.

“Those eyes...” Eleene said, her tone harsh and cold. “Why were His Majesty’s beautiful sapphire eyes passed on to you instead of to my little Patricia? They don’t suit you at all, beast! Why did the gods give his eyes to you and not to my daughter?”

Eleene slowly walked toward Shessfelia, swaying left and right like a phantom.

“Shessfelia, I shall give you one last chance: vow that you will leave the palace and join a temple. If you cannot make that promise, then I’ll just have to use this dagger...”

Eleene paused and slashed the air with her dagger. Shessfelia’s eyes were drawn to the geometrical symbols that were engraved on the blade, which was glowing softly and ominously. It was most likely a cursed blade.

“...to deal with those eyes of yours. Oh, but don’t worry. I won’t pluck your eyes from their sockets. However...”

A sinister pause followed as Eleene’s malevolent grin broadened.

“Let me tell you a little more about this dagger. It was stored away in the palace’s treasure room, you see, and it is known as ‘The Robber,’ because it curses anyone touched by its blade to lose the use of the contacted limb. For instance, if the blade were to graze your arm, you would never be able to move it again. The same is true for your leg. And as for your eyes, well...” Eleene let out a dark chuckle. “You would lose your sight forever. This dagger was once used on criminals as punishment for their misdeeds, and considering how you’re nothing more than a little thief who stole the spotlight from my dear Patricia at her debutante ball, I thought it would be quite fitting to use it on you. Don’t you agree?”

When Shessfelia didn’t reply, Eleene thrust the dagger toward her, the tip stopping mere centimeters away from the little girl’s eye.

“It’s time for you to repent, Shessfelia. Get down and grovel on the floor. Beg me to forgive you for insulting Patricia and hurting my pride. If you do, I promise I will put this dagger away.” This was the last warning Eleene was prepared to give the little girl.

Shessfelia looked up and fixed the woman with a determined stare. “Other-mother Eleene.”

“What is it?”

The corners of Shessfelicia's mouth curled upward. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you can't buy honor with gold coins."

"You... You insufferable little beast!" Eleene shrieked as she thrust the dagger toward Shessfelicia.

I wish I could've seen Amata's face one last time, Shessfelicia thought as the blade neared her eyes.

And then, everything went dark.

Chapter Twenty: Rescue

“So that’s the place, huh?” I said, peering at an abandoned-looking mansion right on the edge of the nobles’ district.

It must have once belonged to an important family, as it was somewhat on the large side. When she interrogated the thugs who’d attacked the inn, Celes had managed to not only squeeze the name of the underground guild they were working for out of them—the Ravenous Black Wolves—but also where their base of operations was located.

“Shiro! I’m back!” Patty called out as she flew toward us. I’d asked her to discreetly scout out the mansion.

“How’s it look?” I asked.

“There’s a lot of shady guys in there!” the fairy replied. “And by ‘a lot,’ I mean a *lot*!”

From what Patty had been able to see, it seemed like the mansion was crawling with petty thugs and men dressed all in black.

“The fact there are men in black in there means we’ve got the right address,” I said.

Luza nodded, a grave look on her face. “Amata, are you *really*...” She paused and turned to point at Aina and Suama who were standing behind us, hand in hand. “Are you *really* bringing these children along too?” she asked.

Our little rescue party consisted of seven people: me, Luza, Aina, Suama, Patty, Celes, and Dramom. Luza probably thought I was crazy for bringing two children along on a potentially dangerous rescue mission, but I didn’t really have a choice. I could hardly send them back to the Thunderbird’s Roost inn after it had been attacked, and there was nowhere else I could get them to lie low. All in all, it was safer if they just stayed with us.

If you’re wondering where Zidan was in all of this, I’d sent him over to the royal palace to inform Queen Anielka of the situation, as we’d had an audience planned with her. I figured we’d already been attacked once on our way to the palace, so the likelihood of him being ambushed en route again was fairly low. Though, just in case, Celes had sent along a few of her familiars to guard him, and if everything had gone without a hitch, he would already have arrived at the palace by now. I didn’t know exactly how powerful the second queen consort was, but I reasoned Queen Anielka must surely have at least a few

guards on her side, and hopefully, they would come and lend us a hand.

“Quick reminder, everyone,” I said, scanning the faces of my companions. “It seems inevitable that we’ll have to fight a bunch of these Black Wolves guys, but don’t forget that rescuing Shess is our number one priority. Got it?”

Everyone nodded. *Okay, now that we’ve got our priorities straight...*

“Amata, how will we enter the mansion?” Luza asked. “If you want, I can act as a decoy and make a ruckus out here while the rest of you sneak inside.”

...it’s time to think about how we’re gonna make it inside that mansion.

There was a determined look on Luza’s face. She was ready to do whatever it took to get Shess back, even if it meant laying down her life. That was just how important the princess was to her. *Well, look at you, Luza. You’re the perfect knight.*

“What do you think of that plan, Amata?” she asked.

I pondered this question for a bit before finally coming up with my own plan of attack instead. As I relayed my idea to Luza, her eyes grew wide with surprise.

“Are you...” she said hesitantly. “Are you being serious right now?”



“Well, well, Mr. Shiro. I didn’t expect you to just stroll up to the front door,” Bart said, punctuating his sentence with a nasal chuckle.

Yup, that’s right. We had decided to simply knock on the door and get inside the mansion that way. One of the thugs invited us to come in, and once we crossed the threshold, we found ourselves in a spacious entrance hall with a large flight of stairs directly in front of us. Bart was standing at the top of the stairs on the second floor with his arms spread wide as if to welcome us.

“Please excuse us for barging in without being invited,” I said politely.

“Oh, there’s no need to apologize. I actually sent my men to bring you here, though it would appear they failed in that particular mission. Thank you kindly for making the trip here yourselves,” the merchant said.

I noticed he was flanked by several guards in armor, as well as a bunch of men in black standing a little farther back. In addition to these men, there must have been about fifty petty thugs like the ones we had encountered earlier milling around on the first floor. That was an impressive number of people, if you thought about it. This wasn’t an underground organization’s base of operations for nothing.

“You have some very efficient bodyguards, don’t you, Mr. Shiro? Not to mention, beautiful!” Bart said, casting a glance at Celes and Dramom, who were standing behind me. He must have guessed that they were the ones who had dealt with his goons.

“Do not look at me, lowlife. Do you not value your life?” Celes spat.

“What an unpleasant man. I shall crush you like the insect you are,” Dramom added.

The two of them weren’t taking any of Bart’s crap, that’s for sure. Their reactions caused Bart’s smile to falter a little.

“Such harsh words,” he remarked with a shrug. “Not only are the two of you beautiful, but you seem quite fearless too.”

I didn’t have time to play along with this farce any longer. “Mr. Bart, as we’re both merchants, I’ll get straight to the point,” I said, quoting what he had said to me last time, word for word.

“Oh, you remember my words? What an honor,” he remarked facetiously.

“Of course. You have been a merchant far longer than I have. Isn’t it only natural to learn from your seniors?” I said. “Anyway, may I continue?”

“Please, go ahead,” Bart replied.

“Where is Princess Shessfelia?” I asked point-blank, glaring at him.

A saccharine-sweet smile appeared on Bart’s face. He chuckled. “How did you guess Princess Shessfelia was here? Oh, but I’m afraid you’re a little too late.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Princess Shessfelia is...” He paused. “Well, it’ll be faster if you just see for yourself.” Bart turned to one of the men in black. “Go tell your mistress that Her Highness’s companions have arrived.”

The man nodded and slipped away without a word. A few seconds later, we heard footsteps on the floorboards above us, as well as the sound of something being dragged.

“Well, well. If it isn’t my favorite barbarian,” the second queen consort said as she came into view.

I felt my heart sink to my stomach. Not because Queen Eleene was here, but because of what she was dragging along behind her.

“Shess!” Aina and I exclaimed at almost exactly the same time.

“P-Princess!” Luza yelled, her eyes wide as saucers.

Queen Eleene had an iron grip on the little girl’s hair and was dragging her along by it.

“Shess! Shess, can you hear me?!” I called out to her.

She must have been unconscious because she didn’t answer when I called her name. I noticed with horror that her hands were bound

and she was only wearing a chemise.

“Do you recognize those voices, Shessfelia? Your dear *friends* are calling out to you,” the second queen consort mocked, drawing a quiet groan out of the little girl.

Oh, thank goodness. She’s ali—

“Shess!” Aina’s scream of horror dragged me out of my thoughts. I’d never heard her sound so heartbroken. “Mister Shiro, Shess...” she sobbed. “Shess’s eyes are...”

I followed Aina’s gaze. My blood ran cold.

“Aw, what a *shame*! Your dear, dear friends have come to pay you a visit, but you can’t even see their faces anymore, Shessfelia,” the second queen consort said, taunting the little girl.

Shess’s beautiful sapphire eyes had been butchered. They were shut tight and trails of blood trickled down the little girl’s face. I didn’t have time to get over my shock, however, because at that moment, Luza drew her sword and dashed up the stairs, bellowing a war cry.

“Y-You monster!” she cried.

She raised her sword high above her head, then swung it toward the second queen consort without even an ounce of hesitation. But, unfortunately for the swordswoman, one of the men in black swiftly positioned himself in between her and Queen Eleene.

“Ugh! Get out of my way!” Luza roared.

Without a word, the man delivered a powerful kick to the knight’s stomach and sent her tumbling back down the stairs, all the way to the bottom.

“You are Shessfelia’s knight, is that right?” the second queen consort said. “You’re the only female knight in the kingdom, so I remember you.” She glanced at the man in black who had just protected her. “These men are part of a tribe of assassins that has been in my family’s service for generations. It is actually thanks to them that our kingdom has turned into the prosperous nation it is now. They have secretly rid the world of the crown’s enemies, my family’s enemies, and of course, *my* enemies. You may have defeated one or two of them earlier, but that was nothing more than luck. They simply didn’t expect you to be there. But, let me tell you, you won’t be so lucky this time.”

Bart chuckled. “You have just come face-to-face with the covert underbelly of the Giruam Kingdom, Mr. Shiro.”

“Now, Bart, that is no way to speak about people who have steadfastly supported our kingdom from the shadows, is it?” the second queen consort chastised him.

The man quickly bowed his head. “My apologies for my faux pas, Your Majesty.” He paused, then seemingly remembered something. “If

I may ask, Your Majesty, what do you plan on doing with Princess Shessfelia?"

This question made the second queen consort glance down at the little girl, almost as if she had completely forgotten about Shess's existence until she was reminded of it just then.

"At first, I was planning to torture her for all of the sins she has committed before eventually killing her, but..." She paused. "I don't really feel like it anymore. It's quite peculiar, actually. I could never stand the girl, but now that I've closed her eyes for good, I've completely lost interest in her."

"I see. You've grown bored of her, is that it?" Bart said, nodding reverentially.

"I have," Queen Eleene sighed, then turned her head toward me. "I suppose in that case, I can give *this* back to you, barbarian."

She waved her hand and one of the men in black nodded, then kicked Shess down the stairs. Luza caught the little girl at the bottom and cradled her to her chest, tears streaming down her face.

"Princess! Princess! It's me, it's Luza! I've come to save you."

"Don't worry, I haven't killed her. However..." Queen Eleene paused and started laughing. "She'll never see your face again. What a tragedy!"

"Please do not fret, princess. I'm sure if we ask the priests over at the temple, they'll be able to—" Luza started.

"They won't," the second queen consort interrupted. "Feast your eyes on this dagger. It is known as 'The Robber' and it places a curse on anyone who is cut by it, making it impossible for them to use whatever body part has come into contact with its blade. It is a most terrifying weapon, but it was in the palace's treasure room for a reason."

Queen Eleene fixed her attention on Luza and sneered. "Do you understand that? Or is it perhaps too difficult for a dumb little girl like you who can only swing her sword left and right?" she said, throwing a dirty glare at the female knight. "Let me spell it out for you. Even if you heal Shessfelia's eyes using magic, she still won't regain her sight. Not ever. Oh, poor little Shessfelia. I really do feel bad for her. She crossed me, and now she has to spend the rest of her days in total darkness. If I were in her position, I think the despair would make me kill myself."

"Princess! Princess!" Luza cried out.

"Shess..." Aina called out to her friend. "Shess, wake up!"

Even while the second queen consort was basking in her victory, Luza and Aina never stopped trying to get Shess to wake up, not even for a moment. I padded over to the little princess, took off my jacket, wrapped it around her, then picked her up. She was incredibly light.

She had somehow managed to withstand the second queen consort's abuse over all of these years with such a small, frail body.

"Dramom," I said to get the white-haired woman's attention. "Can I entrust Shess to you?"

"Yes, master."

"Can you, um..." I said tentatively. "Can you lift the curse?"

"Of course. However, I do have one request. Would it be possible for my daughter to do it in my place? This seems like a good opportunity for her to learn how to use her powers," Dramom said.

"You want *Suama* to do it?" I asked incredulously. "But..."

"Rest assured, my daughter may be young, but she has the same abilities I do. She can easily lift this curse."

"Ai!" Suama squeaked, raising her hand as if to assure me she could do it.

"Thank you, Suama. I'll leave Shess in your care," I said as I gently lowered the princess to the floor in front of the little dragon girl.

"Please help Shess, little Su!" Aina pleaded.

Suama nodded. "Ai!"

"All righty..." I muttered as I slowly stood up and turned around to face Bart and the second queen consort, who were still looking down at us from the second floor.

"Mr. Bart. Queen Eleene," I started.

"What is it, barbarian?" the second queen consort sneered.

"What now, Mr. Shiro?"

I took a deep breath in an attempt to keep my anger under control. "This is your last chance. Please confess to your crimes and face the full judgment of the law," I said, my voice calm and steady.

Their eyes instantly grew wide with shock, but after a couple of seconds of stunned silence, Bart started laughing as if this was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

"Mr. Shiro, I must say I am impressed!" he chortled. "You really can make jokes in any situation, can't you?"

"Bart's right. You should give up your peddling business and become a jester instead, barbarian," the second queen consort added.

"I see. So you won't admit to your crimes, huh?" I said matter-of-factly.

"And why *should* I admit to anything? Besides, what 'law' are you even talking about? In this country, *I* am the law, barbarian," Queen Eleene declared, eliciting another nasal chuckle from Bart.

"Her Majesty is quite correct, Mr. Shiro. His Majesty the King isn't the most influential person in this kingdom. That accolade goes to Queen Eleene. I can't believe you don't even know *that*! You truly are a failure as a mercha—"

“I’ve had enough.”

Bart blinked in surprise. “Would you mind saying that again, Mr. Shiro?”

“I said I’ve had enough,” I repeated, louder this time. My tone was so cold, even I was surprised by it.

“You’ve had enough, have you?” Bart said, laughing. “So you’re giving up? That’s no good, Mr. Shiro. A merchant should remain calm at all times. Don’t you even know that?”

“Well, at the end of the day, he is nothing more than a barbarian. He doesn’t even know the proper way to address me, the queen,” Eleene pointed out.

“Shut up!” I spat.

Both Bart and the second queen consort wore matching expressions of shock.

“Barbarian, do you have any idea whom you are addressing?” Queen Eleene asked me, her tone low and threatening.

“Oh, were my words a little too difficult for you to understand? Let me phrase it another way for you. Shut the *hell* up,” I said slowly. “All you do is spew your poison, so why don’t you go ahead and shut your trap once and for all, you vile, odious queen?”

The pair found themselves once again rendered speechless.

“Y-You absolute...” Queen Eleene stammered, unable to find the words to express her outrage. “You dare to speak to me like—”

“Shut your mouth, insect.”

This time, it wasn’t me who interrupted the second queen consort, it was Dramom.

“My master told you to shut up. That means you are not allowed to open your mouth again for the rest of your miserable existence,” Dramom continued.

The second queen consort’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly like a goldfish’s. I heard a dark chuckle from the other side of me.

“It seems your words are not always a waste of air, Immortal Dragon,” Celes said. “For once, I agree with you. I am absolutely sick of these lowlifes.”

“My, my, it is not often that we are in agreement, demon.”

“While I do find that thought extremely unpleasant...” Celes paused as she took a few steps forward to stand in front of me, her gaze firmly fixed on Bart and the second queen consort. “...it is nothing compared to the disgust I feel toward these two dirtbags.”

“These vermin have dared to insult our master. For that, they deserve to die a thousand deaths,” Dramom said, walking forward to stand next to Celes like a pair of strikers on a soccer field.

I didn’t feel the slightest bit scared with these two absolute powerhouses shielding me.

“Come on, Shiro. Give the order. Tell me to kill these two wretches. The demon ruler has forbidden us from killing humes, but if you are the one who commands me to do it, then I shall disobey that edict,” Celes said.

I shook my head. “Nope. If you kill them, your hands will be tainted with their filthy blood. And besides, like I keep telling you, I don’t *order* you to do things, I *ask* you if you wouldn’t *mind* doing them for me.”

Celes scoffed. “That again. I still do not understand how these two concepts differ.” She paused for a split second and turned to look at Luza, who was still crouching beside Shess and squeezing her hand. “However, I feel I might have an inkling of the distinction now.”

The demon turned back around and cracked her knuckles. “All right, then, Shiro. *Ask* me to get rid of these scumbags.”

“I also await your instructions, master,” Dramom added.

The two of them were clearly ready to fight.

I took a deep breath, pointed at Bart and the second queen consort, and stated, “Celes, Dramom, I want you to punish them.”

“Message received,” the demon responded.

“If that is your command, master,” the dragon woman said.

But at practically the exact same moment that I gave the order for Dramom and Celes to take care of Bart and the second queen consort, the latter of the two turned to the former and said, “Bart. Deal with them.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he replied meekly, before turning and yelling at his goons. “Well, you heard her! Get rid of these fools!”

Final Chapter: A Rainbow Miracle

And so, the final battle had begun.

“Chew on this!”

“Die, bitch!”

“Ya really think yer gonna make it outta here in one piece?”

Wave after wave of thugs charged toward us, taking advantage of the spacious entrance hall to attack us from all sides at once. These people had lived surrounded by violence ever since they were born, which meant fighting was second nature to them, but unfortunately for them, their opponents on this day were absurdly strong.

“Hmph. Scum,” was all Celes muttered before swinging her fist around and sending the thugs flying.

“Scatter, you repugnant maggots,” Dramom uttered coldly as she unleashed a powerful magic attack on another group of thugs that launched them into the air too.

The thugs didn’t stand a chance. It was an absolute trouncing. Though it should be noted that Dramom and Celes weren’t the only ones among our number who could fight. I had one more companion who was very eager to show off her might and was just waiting for me to give the word.

“Go, boss!” I shouted.

Patty instantly shot out of Aina’s backpack, yelling, “Boom! Boom! Kaboom!” as she cast spells left and right. Firing off spells like this in quick succession was probably her way of venting her anger after having her thunder stolen twice in a row, and lightning zigzagged down on the thugs as beams of light shot everywhere and strong winds whipped through the hall.



In a matter of minutes, the fifty or so thugs lay sprawled out on the floor, unconscious.

“I see. Your companions are rather strong, Mr. Shiro. And you even have a fairy in your little crew! I never thought I’d get to lay eyes on one of these mythical creatures in my entire *life*, least of all today of all days,” Bart said with a chuckle, apparently not the slightest bit fazed that all of his goons had just been comprehensively defeated. “Well, now I understand why you’ve been acting so cocksure since you showed up here. Your two bodyguards are every bit as strong as the royal capital’s crystal...”—he stopped and corrected himself—“no, *silver*-ranked adventurers. That’s mighty impressive, considering how young they are. Not to mention, they’re women. However, I can’t help but wonder if you will still look so assured when you see *him*.”

Bart paused, then clapped twice. “Mr. Gridd, it’s your time to shine.”

“Tsk. What a nuisance,” came the gruff response from a room on the second floor.

Moments later, an absolute giant of a man lumbered out of that room, and I noticed almost immediately that he only had one functioning eye, the other seemingly permanently shut. The wooden floorboards creaked under his weight as he joined Bart at the top of the staircase.

“Th-That man...” Luza exclaimed, half-rising from where she was crouching. She seemed to recognize him.

“Mr. Shiro, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Gridd, the leader of the Ravenous Black Wolves and a former gold-ranked adventurer. I am fairly sure from her reaction that your lady knight knows just how strong he is,” he said, casting a knowing smile at Luza.

“Amata, I’ll make a stand here and slow him down. The rest of you escape with the princess,” Luza said to me with a grave look on her face.

She unsheathed her sword and adopted a wider stance, bracing herself for the inevitable incoming attack by the giant man. *So he’s a former gold adventurer, huh?* I mused. While he had obviously retired from the adventuring game, there was no doubt that this man was incredibly strong. In fact, if his former rank was anything to go by, he was much stronger than Raiya and his crew, so it was only natural that Luza’s guard was up.

All of a sudden, the second queen consort’s high-pitched laughter rang out. “I won’t let a single one of you escape! Not after the disrespect you’ve shown me! Vial!”

“Here, Your Majesty,” came the quiet reply of a man dressed all in

black who had just emerged from the shadows.

“Dispose of these individuals!”

“I obey, Your Majesty.”

A murderous aura emanated from the man, and even to someone as unaccustomed to combat as myself, it was obvious that he was much, *much* stronger than his fallen comrades.

“Via is the leader of his tribe. His skills will no doubt be a little wasted on the likes of you, but I shall make an exception just this once to ensure that you all die slow, painful deaths. Consider it your punishment for the disrespect you have shown me. Via, do you understand my orders?”

The man nodded and the second queen consort handed him her dagger.

Meanwhile, the giant of a man started limbering up by rolling his shoulders as he plodded down the stairs. “Bart’s our main backer, and orders is orders. Don’t take it personally, dollies,” he called over to Celes and Dramom.

“A painful death awaits you,” announced the man named Via as he jumped down to the ground floor without making any noise whatsoever.

So the boss of an underground guild and the leader of a tribe of assassins, huh? How would they fare against a demon and a dragon?

“Ya know, I ain’t a fan of killin’ beauties like you. So howzabout this: if ya agree to become my woman, I’ll let ya go. Whaddaya say?” the giant man suggested to Celes, a lecherous grin splashed across his face.

“I am going to crush you, scumbag,” she replied coldly.

“Ooh, I’m almost scared,” the man sneered. “Well, ya forced my hand. Die!”

And with that, he charged at Celes, most likely intending to use his impressive physique to mow her down. The assassin tribe’s leader made his own move at the exact same moment.

“Die,” he echoed as he rushed toward Dramom.

“Know your place, maggot,” she replied calmly, completely unfazed by the man running toward her with a dagger in his hand.

Celes and the giant of a man collided head-on. Dramom allowed the assassin to simply dash past her.

“Is that all you have, hume?” Celes asked the huge man.

Dramom chuckled. “Oh dear. Done already, maggot?”

The fight hadn’t even lasted a minute. Before I had time to blink, both the giant of a man and the assassin were unconscious on the floor.

“Wh-What... You... Mr. Gridd...” Bart stammered in shock.

“What are you playing at, Via?!” the second queen consort barked

down at her fallen servant. "Stand up! Stand up and kill them!"

With my gaze firmly fixed on the pair of them, I clenched my fists and took a step forward.

"Hm? Shiro, are you going to fight too?" Celes asked, noticing my decisive movement.

"Yeah. I was starting to feel a little inadequate just standing around while you three did all the work, you see."

Celes humphed at this. "You are weak. Try not to overdo it."

"I'll be careful," I acknowledged as I loosened my necktie and rolled up the sleeves of my white button-down shirt.

"Master, I will take care of the weaklings down here. You just keep walking ahead."

"Thanks, Dramom."

I slowly ascended the staircase, one step at a time.

"Shiro, you'd better give 'em a good beating! That's an order!" Patty piped up as she landed on my shoulder before shadowboxing with the air to illustrate her point.

"Don't you worry, boss. I plan to whale on them to my heart's content," I replied calmly.

At the top of the staircase, the two supervillains had started panicking.

"A-All of you! Kill Shiro! Kill that man!" Bart yelled hysterically at his bodyguards.

The second queen consort did likewise. "Kill him and every single one of his friends!"

"Understood!"

Bart's guards drew their swords as the remaining men in black peeled out of the shadows and dashed toward me.

"Move," Celes said from somewhere beside me.

"You are in my master's way. Scuttle away, you insignificant maggots," Dramom added from over my other shoulder.

"Let him through! *Boooom!*" yelled Patty, who was still perched on my shoulder.

All three of them used their considerable might to clear the way for me, sending guards and assassins flying in every direction as if they were mere insects. At last, I reached the top of the staircase.

"Sorry for the wait, Mr. Bart," I said, stopping right in front of the man, a cynical smirk on my face.

"Y-You..." he breathed. "Not only did you ruin my reputation in Mazela, you're..." He muttered the rest of his sentence under his breath and I couldn't make out what he said, but all of a sudden, his bloodshot eyes widened and he grabbed the dagger that was dangling at his hip, thrusting it toward me. "Die! Diiiie!" he cried.

"Master!" Dramom exclaimed from behind me.

“I’ve got this!” I quickly reassured her.

I was on the verge of activating my Inventory skill and taking out the pepper spray I kept in there, but I changed my mind at the last second. Pepper spray wouldn’t scratch this itch I was feeling. After all, I’d wanted to beat this man up for so long, I just *had* to deal with him in a more physical way.

“Diiiie!” Bart yelled again.

His dagger was getting closer and closer to me, and I took a deep breath to make sure I wouldn’t freeze up at the critical moment. You see, Raiya had previously taught me how to disarm an opponent. “Now listen carefully, man,” he had said. “The first step is to stay calm.” I played his instructions back in my mind. *If I remember correctly, to deal with an opponent who’s coming at you from the front, you have to do this!*

I quickly stepped to the right just as Bart’s dagger was bearing down on me, and I effectively dodged the attack.

“And next...” I said, still replaying Raiya’s instructions in my head. “Take this!”

I brought the side of my hand down hard on Bart’s wrist in a chopping motion, causing the dagger to clatter to the floor. Bart looked down at the weapon on the ground in disbelief and seemed to hesitate over whether or not he should pick it back up. He decided against it and opted to punch me instead, his arm arcing toward me as he let out an enraged roar. Unfortunately for him, however, this was *exactly* what I’d been waiting for. I smoothly evaded this attack too and slipped behind him. Before he had time to react, I wrapped both of my arms around his waist and clasped my hands together.

“You ready, Bart?” I asked him. “I’m gonna show you the rainbow.”

“The rainbow? What are you—”

“Take *this*!”

I lifted Bart up, bent my back and knees to make a bridge, then slammed him down to the ground with a perfect German suplex, one of the most famous pro wrestling moves in the world, named in honor of pro wrestling god, Karl Gotch. The back of Bart’s head hit the floorboards and he let out a cry of pain unlike anything I’d ever heard before. But I wasn’t done yet. In fact, I’d only just gotten started.

“That was the first one!” I said. My grip still firm around Bart’s waist, I used the back of his head for support as I executed a backflip. “Time for another!” I yelled as I lifted Bart up again then bent backward into yet another German suplex, the man’s head hitting the floor with a resounding thud. That was number two.

I did another backflip and followed it up with a third German suplex. By this point, my friends had started cheering me on and

counting aloud how many suplexes I'd administered to the vile merchant.

"Shiro! That's four!" Patty squeaked.

"Five, master," Dramom commented after I completed a fifth suplex.

"Six," Celes said with a chuckle.

And last, but not least...

"Amata!"

It was Shess. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs with her hands on her hips. "Give him one for me too!" she demanded.

My grip on Bart tightened as soon as I heard her voice. I lifted Bart up and yelled, "Okay! Time for the finale!" then bent back once more, but this time, I threw the man behind me with all my might. His body arced through the air and crashed to the floor, rolling to a halt half-dangling over the top step of the staircase.

"Seven!" Shess yelled excitedly.

This six-German-suplexes-into-a-released-German-suplex combo had been my special move back when I was in my university wrestling club, and it was such a good finishing move, it had made me the club's star. I'd named it the "Rainbow Miracle" (or sometimes, the "Rainbow Suplex").

"What do you think of that, then, Bart? Did you see the rainbow?" I said as I watched him roll down the stairs, gravity having finally won out. He was out cold and his body wasn't even twitching. I turned to the second queen consort next, but was met by a rather unexpected sight.

"You moronic queen! As punishment for hurting the princess, I am going to cut off your head!" Luza roared.

"Stop! No, don't!" the second queen consort yelled back.

I hadn't seen her ascend the staircase, but in that moment, Luza was standing right in front of the queen, bloodlust oozing out of every pore.

"H-Hold on, Luza! Stop!" I said hurriedly.

But Luza wasn't listening. She chuckled like a villain in a movie and raised her sword. "You're the princess's enemy. You deserve to die!"

"Luza, stop!" I exclaimed, pulling her back. I'd successfully managed to wrestle the sword out of her grip, when all of a sudden, I heard laughter coming from right beside us.

"Stop! Stop! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!"

It was the second queen consort. It seemed she had finally snapped, though in all honesty, she'd probably had a screw loose for quite some time. That was what jealousy did to a person.

But that was none of my concern. What mattered was that we had

finally defeated the two main villains of the piece.



“Shess! I’m so glad that curse on you has been lifted!” I exclaimed as I ran down the stairs and brought the little girl in for a tight hug.

“What are you doing, idiot? Let go,” she muttered grumpily.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, giving her some room to breathe. “I was just so happy, I couldn’t help myself.”

She didn’t say a word, but I noticed she was fidgeting.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

Beside us, Luza was shedding tears of joy, such was her relief that Shess was fine, while Aina patted Suama on the head to thank her for her hard work.

“Um, Amata...” Shess started. “I’m sorry for making you go through all this.” She bowed her head. This wasn’t like her at all. Shess was never this meek.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I reassured her. “The only one in the wrong here was that wretched second queen consort.”

“Yeah, I know,” Shess mumbled. “But even so, I’m sorry you got dragged into this situation.”

She lowered her head again and Aina took advantage of the fact that Shess wasn’t looking to softly bonk her on the head. “Shess, don’t apologize,” she told her friend.

“But, Aina...” Shess started to protest, but her friend simply shook her head.

“Shess, no one here thinks coming to rescue you was a hassle. Not me, not Mister Shiro, and not Miss Luza either!”

“Aina’s right, princess,” Luza agreed. “As your knight, keeping you safe is my duty. I simply did what I was meant to do.”

“Luza...” Shess breathed, her beautiful sapphire eyes brimming with clear droplets.

“Shess, in these situations, you don’t say ‘sorry,’” I told her.

“What do you mean?” the little girl said, her eyes widening in surprise.

Aina discreetly muttered something in her ear and Shess looked even more shocked, if that was possible. “A-Are you sure that’s good enough? Are you really, really sure, Aina?” she asked her friend.

“Yup!” the other little girl said, beaming at her. “Come on, Shess, you can do it!” She gave Shess a slap on the back to encourage her.

The young princess looked hesitant for a moment before seemingly making up her mind at last. She looked at all our faces in turn, then said, “Thank you, everyone.”

A bashful smile formed on her face and I couldn’t help being mesmerized by the beauty of it.

Epilogue

It was absolute bedlam when we arrived back at the royal palace, though maybe this shouldn't have come as so much of a surprise to me. After all, the first princess of the kingdom had been kidnapped by the king's second wife, and that was quite obviously a cause for panic. But once we informed the guards that we had brought Shess back safe and sound, the chaos subsided. Well, at least, momentarily. The king himself came to thank us for saving his daughter, and we had a huge reward thrust into our hands, though I was pretty sure it was—at least in part—hush money.

Not long after, the second queen consort was apprehended and placed under house arrest. While she might technically have been the most powerful person in the country, it wasn't as if people could just pretend nothing had happened. In light of that—as I found out later from Luza—she was confined to a village under the king's direct jurisdiction and wasn't allowed to take even one step outside of it. She had driven herself crazy out of jealousy for Queen Anielka and her daughter, so it was definitely in her best interest to spend the rest of her life someplace far, far away from the royal capital.

I decided to give all the money I'd received from the king to Zidan so that he could use it to: A) open up a branch of the Eternal Promise in the capital; and B) help out the orphan children in the non-hume district. When I mentioned the latter of these aims to Zidan, he slapped his chest confidently and said, "Leave it to me, Shiro!" Back in Mazela, Zidan's guild operated from the slums, and not only did the people there have total faith in him, they absolutely adored him, so I was in no doubt that he could bring happiness to the children in the royal capital's slums too.

And just like that, our eventful trip to the royal capital came to an end, and it was time for us all to head back to Ninoritch. Celes, Dramom, Aina, Suama, Patty, and I were in the courtyard of the royal palace, preparing to leave, and Shess—accompanied by Luza and even her mother, Queen Anielka—had come to see us off. Zidan had already left for Mazela three days earlier, and we'd also been told that while the king really wished he could have seen us off too, he was absolutely swamped with work and royal duties, and simply didn't have the time.

"Take care, Shess," Aina said to her friend as she hugged her.

“You’d better take care of yourself too, Aina,” Shess replied.

Both Queen Anielka and Luza were moved to tears by this adorable display of friendship between the two eight-year-olds.

“Oh, I’m so happy for you, Shessfelicia! You’ve made your first friend!” Queen Anielka remarked, sounding all choked up with glistening teardrops moistening her eyes.

“Princess!” Luza sobbed. “My princess!”

Meanwhile, the two little girls were still in the middle of saying goodbye to each other.

“I’ll write you lots and lots of letters, okay?” Aina said.

“I don’t need letters!” Shess replied haughtily. “Come visit me instead!”

“Oh, u-um, I’ll try,” Aina stammered.

C’mon, Shess, don’t you think you’re asking a bit too much there? I thought. Still, Aina didn’t shoot down the idea, likely because she didn’t want to crush Shess’s hopes.

“Amata,” Shess called out to me to catch my attention when she was done saying goodbye to Aina.

“Hm? What is it?” I replied.

“I have to apologize to you for something.”

“To *me*?” I said in some surprise. “What is it?”

“That dress you bought for me... They—” the little girl started, but I interrupted her.

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that. The second queen consort tore it to shreds, didn’t she?”

“I’m so, so sorry!” the little girl cried out, lowering her head. “It was such a beautiful dress! And you had it made just for me! And yet...” She paused, then tried to apologize again. “I’m so—”

“I’ll get them to make you an even cuter dress next time,” I said, interrupting her a second time.

Shess was so taken aback by how casual my response was, the only coherent sound that managed to make it out of her mouth was an incredulous “Huh?”

“Maybe next time, I can even get them to make one for Aina too, so that the two of you will match. What do you think?” I said to the little girl before turning to Queen Anielka. “Your Majesty, if I were to get another dress tailored for the princess, would you be able to organize another ball for her to wear it to?”

“Of course I could,” Queen Anielka answered with a smile. “I will be sure to invite Charlotte next time too.”

“Well, you heard her, Shess. You’d better start looking forward to that ball, because I’m gonna find you the prettiest dress in the entire *universe* this time!”

“Really?” Shess mumbled. “So you’ll...” She hesitated. “You’ll

really come visit me again?"

"Of course I will. Besides, the magic I used on your hair is only going to last six months, tops," I said as I gently caressed her hair. It was short in places and still long in others because of the way the second queen consort had hacked chunks out of it after completely losing her marbles.

"Oh. So my hair's going to go back to how it was before?" she said quietly.

"It will. So I'll have no choice but to visit you again in order to apply some more of my magic to it," I said.

But Shess simply shook her head and smiled at me. "I don't need your magic anymore, Amata," she said.

"Huh? But your hair will go back to how it looked before."

The little girl shrugged. "I don't mind. It's just hair. If I let every little thing I don't like about myself bother me, I'll end up just like other-mother Eleene, won't I?"

I was completely taken aback by her response. "Shess, you..." I started, but I had no real idea what to say to that.

"Even if my hair is all frizzy, and even if people make fun of me for it..." She paused and brought a hand up to her chest, her head held high. "I'm still me. I'm still Shessfelia Shussel Giruam. That's what matters. I have to accept myself for who I am, just like you, Luza, Aina, and my mother have."

That's when I noticed Shess was wearing the fashionable hat Aina and I had bought for her instead of her usual oversized beret. Unlike her beret, this hat didn't hide her hair away out of sight, but instead highlighted her locks, which made her look even more elegant. The little girl who had been so afraid of being judged by others was nowhere to be seen. Shess—no, Princess Shessfelia of Giruam had managed to completely rid herself of the "curse" she had been suffering from since birth.

"You have to become a really successful merchant, Amata. You got that? S-So that you can come and see me at the royal palace!" Shess declared, her face as red as a tomato. But despite her evident embarrassment, she had her hands on her hips in a power stance.

Aina and I glanced at each other and neither of us could stop ourselves from chuckling at this.

"I'll do my best," I told her. "I'll become so successful, you'll want to hire me as your royal purveyor when you grow up."

"What are you talking about? You're *already* my merchant," she said with a pout.

I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I reached out a hand and ruffled her hair. "Thanks, Shess. All righty. Time we made a move. As much as I'd like to stand around here chatting forever, we need to get

home at some point,” I said before turning away from the little girl.

I heard a disappointed “Oh” escape from Shess’s lips, but I didn’t turn back. Instead, I looked at Dramom and said, “Dramom, we’ll be counting on you again today.”

She nodded. “Yes, master. But if I may...” She seemed hesitant for a moment. “Are you *sure* you want me to do it here?”

“Yup, go right ahead. Don’t hold back, you hear? If there’s any lookie-loos spying on us right now, I want them to tremble in fear at the sight of your true form.”

“I understand. Well, in that case...”

Dramom’s entire body started glowing, and an instant later, a magnificent white dragon was standing in the courtyard of the royal palace.

“That’s a dragon!” Shess exclaimed.

Luza, on the other hand, was so shocked, she couldn’t even say the word “dragon” and just kept repeating, “A d-d-d... A d-d-d...” while frantically pointing at the transformed Dramom.

“My, my. So you were a dragon rider all along, Shiro? And that woman is your dragon, it seems,” Queen Anielka calmly summed up. She didn’t seem the least bit panicked or shocked by this turn of events, which made me wonder if she’d seen a dragon before. Or maybe she hadn’t, and she was just extremely good at controlling her emotions. Either way, I was impressed. She wasn’t the queen just for show, huh?

All four of us climbed up onto Dramom’s back one at a time, though when it came to Celes’s turn, Dramom once again wouldn’t let her on board. It seemed Celes would have to fly solo again this time too.

Now, you might be wondering why I’d asked Dramom to change into dragon form in the middle of an open courtyard like this. It was rather simple, actually. I wanted people to understand that Shess had powerful allies. After all, I wasn’t born yesterday. I knew that even with the second queen consort pretty much in exile, the people who had criticized Shess over the last few years weren’t just going to suddenly stop spilling their venom. So this was my way of supporting her. By having Dramom show off her dragon form to the people in the royal palace, I was basically saying to them, “If you mess with Shess, you’ll have a dragon to answer to.”

“We’ll come back soon, okay, Shess? And next time, I’ll have an even cuter dress for you to wear.”

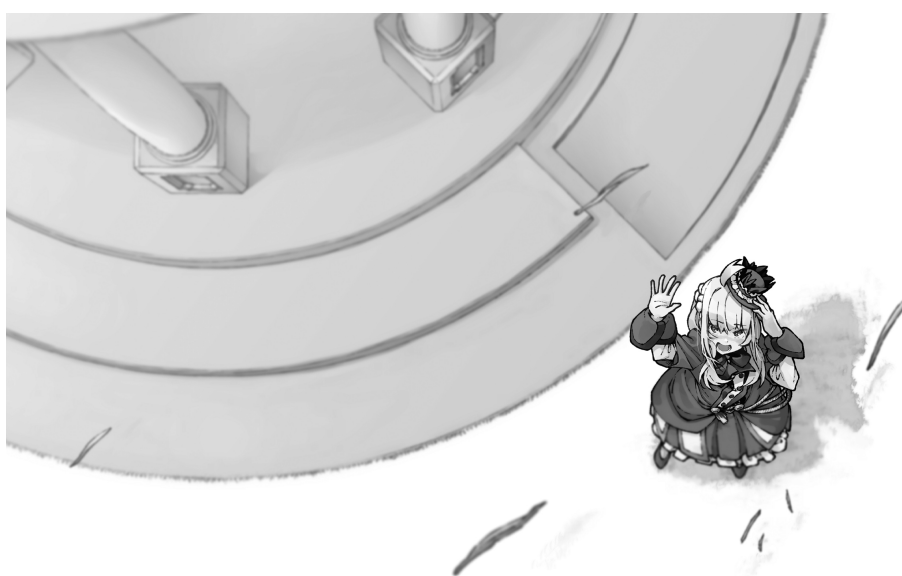
“I’ll be waiting for you,” Shess called up to me. “I’ll be waiting, okay, Amata?”

Dramom started flapping her wings and took off, a floating sensation gripping my body as I suddenly found myself in midair.

“We’ll be back, Shess!” Aina yelled down as we started climbing.

“See you soon, Shess!” I called out, though by this point, my voice was getting lost as we soared higher into the sky. “Dancing with you at the ball was so much fun!”

And with that, we departed from the royal capital with Shess waving at us until we were out of sight.





The trip home passed us by in the blink of an eye. It felt like we had barely left the capital before the familiar sight of Ninoritch came into view. We had all successfully made it home again in one piece, though Celes looked a little worse for wear after flying the whole way back without massive dragon wings. I escorted Aina back to her home and left the rest of my companions to wander off to god knows where to do god knows what.

Finally finding myself alone, I had a good old stretch. “This place really does feel like home, doesn’t it?” I mused aloud. Once my stretching had done the trick and my body wasn’t so stiff anymore, I muttered a quiet “All righty” to myself and started walking.

Three weeks had passed since I was last in Ninoritch, and I knew for a fact that the second I set foot in the Fairy’s Blessing guild, I’d be swarmed by a bunch of adventurers begging me to tell them all about my adventures in the royal capital. I decided to make my way to the guildhall all the same, and when I got there, I pushed open its heavy front door, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Huh?”

The atmosphere in the place was completely different from usual, but if you were to ask me to explain how exactly, I’d find it difficult. It would be wrong to describe the general mood as less animated, but it definitely wasn’t anywhere near as noisy as usual. A lot of the adventurers I could see were talking in hushed voices with serious expressions on their faces.

“Hey, man! Long time no see!” Raiya called over to me, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Hey, nice timing, Raiya.

“Hi, Raiya. I’m back.”

“Welcome home, man. You made it back way sooner than I thought you would,” he remarked.

“Let’s just say I had a *very* good means of transport,” I said evasively, flashing him a smile. “But, uh, Raiya...”

“Yes? What is it?”

I looked around the guild again. “The atmosphere in here is a lot different from usual, isn’t it? Did something happen?” I asked.

“Oh. Uh, yeah, I guess you could say that,” he said, scratching his cheek and looking somewhat awkward. “We found a new set of ruins out in the forest.”

“Really? But that’s great, isn’t it?” I said.

“It is. And most people would be overjoyed by the find. Under normal circumstances.”

“And I take it these are not normal circumstances?” I surmised.

“Bingo. It is said that if you enter these particular ruins...”

I had only recently started getting used to the more fantastical aspects of this other world, but the words he uttered next shook me to my very core.

“...you can encounter the dead.”

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the fifth volume of *Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back To My World Whenever I Want!* I'm the author, Hiiro Shimotsuki.

In this volume, Shiro's adventures have finally taken him to the royal capital. While there, we met a new heroine in the form of Shess. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted her personality to be like, but in the end, I settled on her being somewhat rebellious. We were also joined on our travels by two other characters: Celes—who was the main antagonist in the previous volume—and Dramom, Suama's mother. I had a lot of fun writing about them driving Shiro up the wall. I hope you enjoyed reading about all their antics.

We'll be back in Ninoritch for the next volume! I'm planning on having the story centered around a certain character whom we haven't seen a whole lot of over the past few volumes. I'll do my best to write it as fast as I can, so I hope you will all look forward to it.

All right, now it's time for some advertising.

Thanks to your continuing support, the manga version of *Peddler in Another World* is doing fantastically well. Thank you all. The second volume is now available for purchase, and by the time this book comes out, we should be pretty close to the publication date of the next volume. If you haven't read it yet, I highly encourage you to go check out Shizuku Akechi-sensei's *Peddler in Another World* manga (It's an absolute masterpiece). The male characters are all very handsome, the female characters are totally adorable, and of course, it's full of scenes and storytelling elements that are particular to the manga genre.

Now, onto the acknowledgments:

To Takashi Iwasaki-sensei, thank you so much for drawing the illustrations for this volume despite being really busy working on the anime adaptation of one of your series. I always love seeing your already incredible sketches transform into absolute masterpieces. I'm already looking forward to seeing your illustrations for the next volume.

To Shizuku Akechi-sensei, who is responsible for the manga adaptation of this series, thank you so much for always producing such high-quality work, chapter after chapter! I often find myself feeling really moved when I'm reading through them. Certain things

really do hit differently in manga form!

To my editor and the whole editorial department of HJ Bunko, thank you for the valuable help you gave me this time as well, and I'm really sorry for all the trouble I caused you!

To my family, my friends, my dogs, and my fellow author buddies, as always, thank you for your support.

And the biggest, fattest thank you of all goes to you, the reader, for reading up to this point!

Lastly, I will once again be donating part of the royalties from this book to people in need. This time, I have chosen an association that supports children with medical conditions such as cancer, as well as their families. So by purchasing this book, you are also contributing to supporting these children.

See you all soon!

Hiiro Shimotsuki



"I am the
Immortal
Dragon,
master.
I was
brought
back to
life by
your
blood."



"I said let
me go!"

"Yowch!"

Patty was just
about to unleash
her magic on the
man, when all of
a sudden, tragedy
struck. The little
girl delivered a
kick squarely to
the man's groin.

"You there!
Don't just
stand there
and watch!
Help me
right this
instant!"



“What
do you
mean?”

“Mister!
Care to
tell me
what’s
going on
here?”











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Peddler in Another World: I Can Go Back Whenever I Want!

Volume 5

by Hiiro Shimotsuki

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